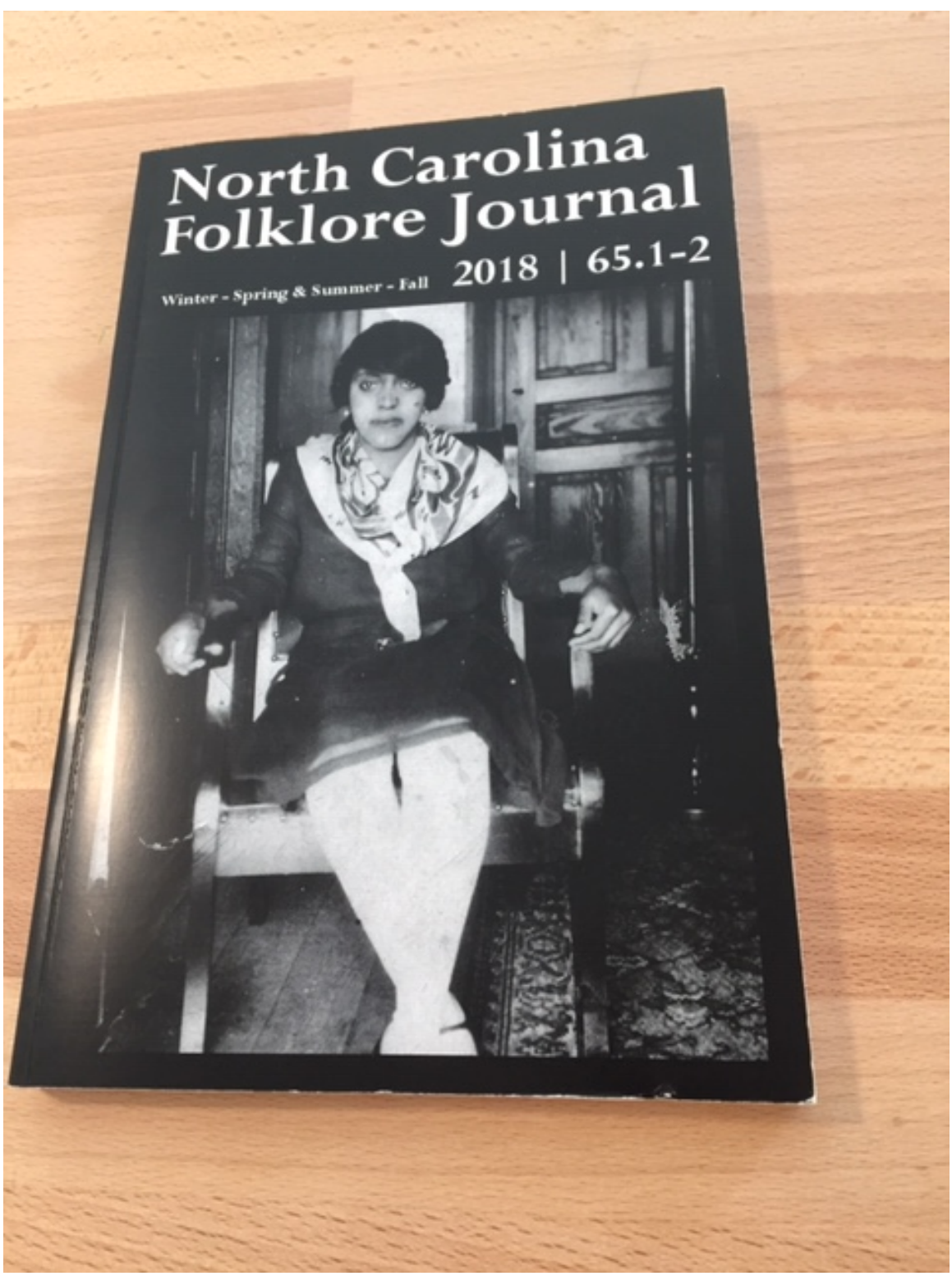
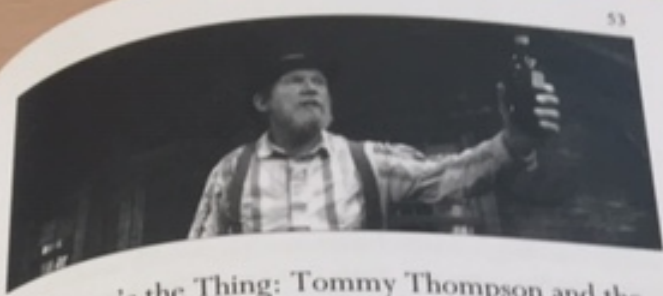


**THE PLAY'S THE THING:
TOMMY THOMPSON AND THE "LAST SONGS" OF
JOHN PROFFIT AND CHARLIE POOLE**

**Lew Stern
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The Play's the Thing: Tommy Thompson and the "Last Songs" of John Proffit and Charlie Poole Lew Stern

In the 22 years Tommy Thompson spent with the Red Clay Ramblers—a band born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1972—he thrived on the friendship, music, and creative options that a musician's life brought to him. Tommy wrote inventive lyrics, collaborated productively and energetically with band members on songs and scripts for plays, worked tirelessly to develop a band niche, and threw himself into the task of booking a continuously challenging schedule of gigs for the Ramblers.

The original Red Clay Ramblers were those present at creation—Tommy, Jim Watson and Bill Hicks, along with Mike Craver who joined the band in 1973, and Jack Herrick who became a Red Clay Rambler in 1976. That band broke onto the local music scene; played North Carolina venues; expanded to playing festivals, workshops, and concerts across North America and Europe; and found their way to the stage in the Off-Broadway production of *Diamond Studs* (about Jesse James) in the mid-1970s. The band evolved, both musically and in its membership—Bill Hicks departed in 1981, and Mike Craver and Jim Watson left the band in 1986. The Ramblers continued with new talent. Between the mid-1980s and 1994—the year Tommy left the Ramblers—the band produced 12 LPs and continued to perform widely and travel extensively.

Frame photo: Tommy Thompson as John Proffit, 1990. Photo: Repertory Theatre of St. Louis (www.repstl.org/archive/detail/the-last-song-of-john-proffit).

Introduction

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Tommy's own taste for the intellectual adventures - song and lyric writing, theatrical work, play writing in addition to making music - emerged in the context of the Red Clay Ramblers. He gravitated to writing plays, in part because of his earliest theatrical work with local theatre productions in Chapel Hill, in part because of the felicitous experience with the off-Broadway run of *Diamond Studs*, but equally because of the invigorating work the Red Clay Ramblers did on Sam Shepard productions.

This paper looks closely at two of Tommy's plays, "The Last Song of John Proffit," and his effort to write a similarly structured one-person play about Charlie Poole.

"The Last Song," and The Next to the Last Song

"The Last Song of John Proffit," a play written by Tommy Thompson over the course of a decade, from 1980 to 1991, and refined and revised during the course of its several performances, was essentially about Dan Emmett, an American songwriter, entertainer, and founder of the first troupe of the blackface minstrel tradition. Emmett claimed to

have written the tune “Dixie,” though research has shown that the tune was authored by an African American family, the Snowdens.¹ In Tommy’s words:

Daniel Decatur Emmitt [sic] was the most popular American entertainer of the 19th Century. He is known as the composer of the southern anthem "Dixie," "Old Dan Tucker," "The Boatman's Dance," and dozens of other familiar songs and melodies. "Uncle Dan" was a fiddler, banjo player, singer, dancer, and a comic storyteller. He was also the founder of the Virginia Minstrels, the original black-face musical troupe. The group gave its first performance in New York City in 1842. The program included vocal and instrumental music, dance, comic skits and monologues. It was billed as an authentic depiction of life among plantation slaves.²

A two-page program from the original production of “The Last Song of John Proffit” at the University of North Carolina in 1984 stated the storyline:

The character John Proffit is a fictional compilation of the musicians Tommy Thompson has known in his years of participation in old-time music. First performed in 1984, the play takes place in 1900 in the kitchen of John Proffit’s West Virginia cabin. Thompson portrays Proffit as an 87-year-old man who was a friend and fellow minstrel with Dan Emmitt. The story unfolds around Proffit’s hardscrabble life in pre-Civil War North Carolina and his friendship with Emmitt, “the prince of foolishness,” and interweaves the birth of a nation’s most popular music with the death of its most peculiar institution. Proffit quits the minstrel show when he realizes it insults the blacks who taught him to play and goes on to tell the tale of how Emmitt stole the tune for Dixie from blacks and took the credit for being its composer. Thompson’s dry, flawless comic timing and the underscore of old-timey banjo tunes, original songs, and classics amplify the serious comment on racial relationships in the late 1800s. “In the Ramblers,” Thompson explains, “we always try to credit where a song comes from on stage—who wrote it, what its history is. Creating John Proffit was just a more vivid and striking attempt at the same thing.”³

¹ Howard Sacks and Judith R. Sacks, *Way Up North In Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

² Tommy Thompson, “The Last Song of John Proffit: One Act Play by Tommy Thompson – The Playwright’s Notes,” <http://www.earlyblurs.com/proffit.htm> Tommy rendered the family name of Daniel Decatur “Dan” Emmett as Emmitt, and Emmitt, probably not purposely - more likely, as the result of trying to write at a fast pace, fluently, without pausing to correct spelling, though there is the possibility that this reflected a bit of playfulness, also reflected in the way he toggled back and forth between Proffit and Proffitt, and Proffit.

³ <http://www.earlyblurs.com/proffit.htm>

In an undated one-page typescript entitled “The Life of John Proffit: A Solo Musical,” that probably dated from the earliest incarnation of the play in the mid-1980s, Tommy, the presumed author of this note, spoke directly to the core ideas underlying the project, and the nature of the main “fictitious” character. John Proffit, the one-page document stated, derived a “strong sense of identity” from his music and his role as an entertainer, but as that career places him in circles of friendship with “wealthy white society,” his “religious and moral certainties begin to erode.” The second sentence of the one-pager read:

A just deity, he [John Proffit] believes, would never permit the evil of society. And, if there is no god, there is no standard of good and evil: one may as well do as one pleases.

Those thoughts spoke to the part of the play that had John Proffit traversing the minstrel world, flourishing as a traveling minstrel, and eventually becoming disillusioned with “being a counterfeit negro.” He returned to North Carolina, where he learned that the “free Negro blacksmith” he initially, early in his life, befriended, was killed in a dispute over a piece of land. The one pager stated:

Although the identity of the white killer is known, a legal technicality prevents conviction. During the course of a vain attempt at revenge, Proffit discovers the lesson of his own life: if a man’s greed can give value, market value, to a piece of land or a human life, then likewise, his grace can confer upon them sanctity. He can give them spiritual value.

Toward the end of “The Last Song,” Proffit leaves the south, settles in what is now West Virginia, becomes a farmer and handyman, finds a wife, and “plays music by the fireside and begins to write the songs of his life.”⁴

“The Last Song” was widely regarded by Tommy’s friends, fellow musicians, his associates from the world of theatre as an inspired bit of playwriting that speaks to Tommy’s love of traditional music and its old masters. The play delved into Tommy’s long standing interest in the source musicians, and dwelled on the kinds of issues that confronted musicians such as Tommy who were inspired by traditional tunes, often dug down to find the authentic origins of those tunes, and found themselves ensnared in the complex history of race relations, the Civil War, and its antecedents and consequences. It also reflected the extent to which Tommy thought about the fraught history that nurtured music along the points at which frontier culture drew black and white populations into close proximity in daily life.⁵ Tommy commented that Emmett’s stage shows were in fact exaggerated, comic and often grotesque depictions of that life:

⁴ “The Life of John Proffit: A Solo Musical,” undated one page synopsis of “The Last Song of John Proffit,” Jessica Thompson’s personal files, Durham, North Carolina.

⁵ Alan Jabbour thought of Tommy, particularly in his play “The Last Song Of John Proffit,” as being focused on “reexamining the relationship between black and white, and the transfer of the banjo from black musicians to white musicians, and of exploring how

[Emmet] and his fellow entertainers, like many other young white men, had journeyed in the South, and had indeed studied the performing arts of the slaves. And then they had returned to Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, wherever;^[1] donned outlandish costumes (mocking the ragged hand-me-downs of the slaves), darkened their skin with burnt cork, tuned up their instruments, and become America's first pop stars.⁶

On Writing John Proffit

When he set to the task of writing "The Last Song," Tommy jotted down ideas and inspirations in note form, sometimes on random sheets or pieces of paper, and sometimes in notebooks. He sought to address concrete problems that emerged in the context of dialogue or stage directions by exploring alternative versions of pieces of script for the play.⁷ He appeared to have started out with a notion of the structure of action for the play, and then moved to the task of compiling an inventory of challenges confronting the character of John Proffit. At that point, he seemed to have turned his mind to the job of populating the play - beyond the central character, the remainder of the field of parts would be determined by the "action" and the "challenges" confronting the key character. He moved from that point to determining the "topography" the characters would have to traverse - the scenes, the envisioned physical locations referenced in the play. At that point, he began thinking about the dialogue necessary to push the story along. The last thing that he addressed was the question of where music should fit into the equation.⁸

Tommy's notebooks show the extent to which the script for the one man show evolved from a very dramatic and multi-level approach to the issues of minstrelsy, and the life of Dan Emmett - layered with recollections, flashbacks and other references to the key

that happened *spiritually*, and bringing to bear a contemporary way of looking at the tradition itself." <http://mikecraver.com/tttributes.html>

⁶ Tommy Thompson, "The Last Song of John Proffit: One Act Play by Tommy Thompson – The Playwright's Notes," <http://www.earlyblurs.com/proffit.htm>

⁷ Letter, 1 April 1989, on the addition of a second musician, offstage, underscoring work, and the music to cover scene changes, in Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffit, Folder 3, Script with penciled-in revisions, 1 April 1989, Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁸ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffit, Folder 6, Early notes, drafts, reading lists, overlooked gems of wisdom, etc., Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

characters in the story - to a much more economical, parsimonious story that is focused instead of sprawling, much more in control of the timeline, far more linear, and more consumed with the character of John Proffitt.

One early draft begins with black faced men configured onstage and ready for the beginning of a show by Dan Emmett. That scene set in the late 1890s shifts quickly to an earlier scene, revolving around a black man in neat work clothes in the south, in the 1840s, writing in a journal, himself remembering a minstrel show. The scene shifts back to the minstrel show, the one set in the late 1890s, and John Proffitt makes his appearance at the end of the show, though here Tommy excised a start-up dialogue in which Proffitt is made to talk about his acquaintance with Emmett. In this early version, Proffitt ends up talking to some of the showmen who linger after the performance, and conversation turns to an aging Dan Emmett who is 80 years old, still ambulatory, but clearly slowing down. Emmett remains the subject of conversation between Proffitt and the minstrels, who adjourn to a bar for a friendly round of drinks, where Proffitt eventually drives the conversation to how he and Emmett worked together, and to his own road to the minstrel life.

Seven pages into this draft, Tommy stopped and began to write about an alternative way of managing the scenes. He speculated about having Proffitt playing banjo with a black fiddler in a “fancy” small town hotel bar as the starting point for the action, but he dressed up Proffitt’s audience, shifting from the minstrel players who just completed their performance to “prosperous Ohio valley farmer-businessmen.” At some point, Tommy moved the action from the bar to John Proffitt’s home, and the discussion about Emmett continued there. Tommy wrestled with ways of shifting the discussion to the subject of Emmett, and eventually to John Proffitt’s minstrel performance career and everything that led up to, and came after, his time with Emmett. On the 9th page of these notes, Tommy refocused on telling the story through the remembrances of Jake, the man in whose shop Proffitt learned some woodworking, but eventually Proffitt succumbed to the lure of joining up with a traveling snake oil salesman of sorts. That is, early on Tommy had planned to have Proffitt take to the road. Those notes seem to have been penned in the spring of 1986.⁹

Probably about the same time, Tommy underscored one short note in one of his small notebooks, probably dating to 1986, in which he stated that “Proffitt” – using one of the alternate spellings to which he sometimes resorted – “must worry about Right and Wrong and God.” Is something right, he muses in clipped language, because “God says so?” In the absence of a God, “is there no Right and Wrong?” Does God infallibly judge Wrong from Right? Or do his commandments define it.

⁹ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folders 6, 8, 9, John Proffitt: Early Notes, and Notebooks, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

It is not clear whether Tommy thought he needed to do more to tease out that internal dialogue so that John Proffit could be shown to have weathered this argument, contemplated these possibilities, and come to a conclusion – or simply shoved the urge to make judgments aside.

Some of the revisions to a late 1984 version are cosmetic, offering alternative grammatical constructions or lines that play better, more articulately, from a stage. Some move various tunes in and out of the script, trying out numbers that in later versions, in the early 1990s, did not survive as tunes Proffit would play or sing. Some of the dialogue, handwritten in draft form, had Proffit bouncing ideas around with an interlocutor, Hadley Horton Stroud, the medicine show peddler who Proffit joins at one point. In later versions of the script, Proffit relates Horton's views, and characterizes his thinking - the dialogue between Proffit and Horton disappears, and is replaced by the musings of Proffit. In the earlier drafts, though, the give and take between these two is meant to capture some fundamental and foundational ideas – doing good now for the sake of presumed future benefit, whether God confers “goodness” on an act or an idea or a thought, the notion that things that seem evil are part of something larger that speaks to “the greater good.” Here, Tommy was definitely focused on why God compels man to confront “unanswerable questions,” and how spiritual values can exist in the absence of a God. This is what the play was about, at that point in the mid-1980s, as Tommy was shaping and reshaping the focus, direction, and dialogue.

The early draft leads the characters through a thicket of contention, initiated when Horton suggests that something might seem evil, but not be evil. Proffit pulls the discussion back to the issue at hand, the matter of importance for him - how Horton can travel around, blithely selling bilge water as a curative. “I don't see how any good can come of gypping innocent farmers,” Proffit asserts, and Horton answers: “Maybe gullibility was put on earth for your benefit?” When Proffit waves that comment aside as being ridiculous, Horton states:

Don't be so sure. People will always be looking to believe an easy way out of their misery. That's how whatever must be, must be acceptable. Accept it, John, and Profit by it.

A version of that line remains preserved in the August 1990 script; it may very well have been too good a line to pass up. In Tommy's draft dating to the mid-1980s, Proffit replies that selling something that might be harmful as medicine “is just plain wrong.” “Anybody can see that,” he concludes, to which Horton replies: “Something can seem wrong and not be wrong.” In the 1990 version, the line reads: “Sometimes a thing can seem evil and not be.” At this point in his editing work, Tommy segues from writing dialogue to composing a brief inventory of the elements of Proffit's character, the moral blunders he has committed, and philosophical challenges they represent – presumably because these are notions he wants to see imbedded in the script. Proffit, Tommy appeared to suggest, did not recognize the existence of soul as distinct from body, and may have been as ill equipped as anyone else to distinguish between God's best intentions and the devil's worst plans. Tommy seemed to want Proffit to argue how one

might know what God wants and thinks, why anyone might assume that God's thinking coincides with what any man might conceive of as good or right. Tommy also wanted Proffit to think about fate and coming to grips with the riddles of life - something he might have thought of as the "last song." At some point in the draft that probably dated to the mid-1980s, Tommy configured a phrase that was intended for Proffit: "It's bad enough to be young and not know what's going to happen, don't let yourself get old and not know what has happened." That phrase did not survive in later drafts, including the August 1990 version and a later April 1991 version, but seemed to have been intended to speak to an enduring riddle that confronted Proffit with the reality that his identity as either black or white, or dead or alive, would not be enough to avoid the contradiction of being young and ignorant of the future, or old and ignorant about the past.

Where Dan Emmett, And Minstrelsy, Stood

Artifacts of draft efforts, in Tommy's handwriting, suggest that through mid-1980s, Emmett was still a presence in the script, and that the character John Proffit remained ambiguous about what Emmet's life work represented. One page of handwritten dialogue intended for the character John Proffit illustrates this. Proffit tells his visitors:

You go up and see old Dan. He'll be glad for the company, I know. He'd no more retired and settled down for good when his wife walked out. Went back to Cleveland or Buffalo or somewhere. Probably because he wouldn't talk to her. I shouldn't be over hard on him though. There has never been in this earth a creature like Dan Emmit in Blackface. That's why nobody can tell you what his show was like - there are no comparisons. But that doesn't prove it was only make believe. Maybe doing his show was as real as Dan ever got. When he'd leave the stage and wash the cork off his face and, something in him would just vanish - like the fist when you open your hand. I think poor [Mrs.] Emmit was living with the barely inhabited body of Dan Emmit. [. . .] He meant no harm. There was no malice in him. That's not to say there was no harm done. It was Dan and Christy and some of those other early ones fathered the poisonous [. . .] shows we have today.¹⁰

By 1989, the script had evolved into a much more careful consideration of the moral, political and social implications and consequences of burnt-cork blackface musicians in

¹⁰ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folder 6, John Proffitt: Early Notes, Drafts, Reading Lists, Overlooked Gems of Wisdom, etc., Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This page of draft dialogue may have been intended as an ending for the play; a heading was crossed out along with all but the last five or six lines that began with "He meant no harm . . ."

the 1840s who “participated in the earliest exploitation (bad) and appreciation (good) of Black music by White America.”¹¹

Tommy’s thinking about the character he intended to occupy central stage in his play evolved over time. As he explained in early 1991, he could not make a hero out of Dan Emmett, an American songwriter, entertainer, and founder of the first troupe of the blackface minstrel tradition. By that time, Tommy had begun to think of the period from the mid- to the late 1880s as a “morally interesting” point in American history during which key moral conflicts emerged for the relatively new nation, and cultural exploitation crystallized as a political, social and religious conundrum. Tommy told an interviewer, in February 1991, that what he did in his own work with source musicians - elderly white Appalachian fiddlers and banjo players, and aging African American folk musicians in the Piedmont region that he had sought out either by himself or in the company of musical colleagues and academics - was “very wrong,” and that by the early 1990s he had stopped doing that sort of work.¹²

It is not clear what brought that thought to his mind and changed his way of thinking about the work of seeking out and preserving the archaic music of elder practitioners of traditional Appalachian music. Tommy had not studied this kind of folklore field work methodology himself, in a formal way, but he found himself, over time, in the company of people pursuing such field work - either as students (Henry Glassie, Bill DeTurk) or as scholars (Cece Conway). In the early 1960s, he had gone along on such searches out of an early interest in local music, and in the 1970s he had lent his assistance in the form of advice and guidance from a musical professional to academics focused on such work. During field work for Cece Conway’s study of African American banjo players in North Carolina, Tommy provided assistance, advice and support, and found himself drawn to both the personalities and the music of these “songsters.” Tommy, as an inquisitive contemporary musician and an accomplished instrumentalist, was excited by the prospect of playing music with these elders, comparing experiences of learning music and performing, and talking about the origins of the tunes, and the methods they called upon to get their banjos working for them.¹³

¹¹ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folder 11, John Proffitt Program Booklets, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The program quoted is from the showing of “The Last Song of John Proffitt” at The Arts Center of Carrboro, North Carolina on 20 May 1989.

¹² Abe D. Jones, “Digging Up ‘Dixie’: A White Singer Discovers How Slaves Lost Their Place in American Music History,” *Greensboro News and Record*, 28 February 1991.

¹³ AFC 1976/033, The Cecelia Conway and Tommy Thompson North Carolina Recording Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Tapes containing 21 seven inch tapes of recordings of black musicians in North Carolina including Dink Roberts, John Snipes, Joe and Odell Thompson, and Dump Fair.

At some point, perhaps in the context of his intensive reading about minstrelsy, slavery and the civil war era, Tommy went beyond being merely fascinated with the relationship of good and evil in the story of the minstrels and began to think of the personal consequences for him of the moral conflicts that made “The Last Song” such an intriguing subject for a play. In a second February 1991 interview, he explained that drama, such as his own one man play, deals with choices. The minstrels, he observed, could have chosen to play the music they heard black people singing and dancing in a manner that reflected those styles, accurately depicting what they heard, and they could have directly acknowledged the origins of that music, the sources from whom they learned the tunes. However, Tommy observed, they did not. Instead, they “corked up” – colored their faces black – and made fun of that music.¹⁴

That seems to be a later formulation of the proposition on which Tommy based the decision to write a play, originally intended to feature the career of Dan Emmett. In late 1984, for example, Tommy told an interviewer that he had spent many hours at the knee of old time musicians “learning not only their instruments, but a sense of the music, how important it was in their lives.”

I’ve taken that knowledge, combined it with my own experiences and figured out, somehow, how to make a living by playing music. There is no way I can repay them (I haven’t made that much money!) but this is one way I’ve chose to pay my respects to the people and my teachers, their teachers, and so pay both Black and White.¹⁵

Dan Emmett, Tommy said at the time, had made his living doing rather scurrilous parodies of Black people. That represented a dilemma for Tommy, who was invested in writing about minstrelsy, but not inclined to suggest that there was anything redeeming about that form of entertainment and what it said about our culture and country.

By the early 1990s, after taking the play through several incarnations, Tommy appeared to believe that his decision to substitute the historical figure of Dan Emmett for the fictitious character of John Proffit would yield a play inhabited by a central character whose choice to perform in black face was far more conflicted, and whose life reflected more of the uncertainty and moral challenges that characterized personal and social choices in the mid-1800s. In a 28 March 1996 letter to Tommy, Melinda Penkava-Smith wrote:

¹⁴ Kim Underwood, “Show Recounts Minstrel Story,” *Winston Salem Journal*, 17 February 1991, pp. H.1., H.2.

¹⁵ Joe Vanderford, “A Picker’s Soliloquy: Tommy Thompson and ‘John Proffit’ Comes to the PRC,” *The New Durham Spectator*, 27 September – 3 October 1984, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 5, 7.

I remember once seeing a piece you wrote about the stage production in which you said that you'd initially wanted to center the play on Dan Emmett, but had to come up with a fictional character who would be more sympathetic, so John Proffit was born.¹⁶

Susan Ketchin, a writer, teacher and musician, met Tommy in the mid-1970s, became smitten with the Red Clay Ramblers, and cemented a close friendship with Tommy and his second wife Cece Conway. Ketchin worked for *The Western Wake Herald* in the mid-1970s and conducted a series of interviews with Tommy that yielded a profile for the newspaper. Ketchin had a very specific memory of what motivated Tommy to write the one-man play, *The Last Song of John Proffit*, a play she saw performed early on in the evolution of that script – and she retained a signed copy of one of the earlier drafts that Tommy presented to her. She recalled:

He was really angry as well he should be that that damn song had been hijacked and taken over by white supremacists basically . . . He didn't use that term, but [he was angry that the song had been] taken over by white southerners of the ruling class which is a broader category of people and it was sung sort of as an anthem to Dear Old Dixie and how it is going to rise again . . . and he tied this in, and his anger was tied in with the fact that the banjo, the history of the banjo and where it came from and how it was appropriated and taken over by white musicians and . . . he was angry about the whole history of the south and the civil war and how easily and arrogantly I think whites or white history and culture sort of appropriated any sort of black uniqueness in culture and vision and voice and just sort of absorbed it and obliterated any mention or hint of oppression or slavery or cruelty. It began with an anger on that one and it was a very in some ways biting satire and lament about that.¹⁷

* * *

There was an intensity to Tommy's musical interactions with elder source musicians – his visits to the homes of those elders; the work he did with revivalists in terms of

¹⁶ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folder 5, John Proffit Radio Cut (edited), with correspondence from Melinda Penkava-Smith, Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁷ Author's notes, interview with Susan Ketchin (conducted by telephone), Beaufort, North Carolina, 5 December 2016, 10:00 – 1036 A.M. Also see Barry Poss to Melinda Penkava, on "State of Things," 91.5 FM, WUNC Radio, 26 February 2003, a program in honor of Tommy Thompson a month following his passing.

studying the old music and finding ways to play tunes authentically, and creatively. That concentrated excitement shows up in the play in the ardor that Proffit brings to the task of explaining his circuitous path in life and the way that trajectory took him close to the music, and wedded minstrelsy to his life.

In the first lines of the opening act, Proffit mocks the author of the letter, a “representative of a group of thespians and theatre enthusiasts,” thus rocking the people he imagines will be his inquisitors back on their feet in a scene that has the hillbilly in him insulting the city boy for his distinctive language and locution. An early draft dated 22 August 1990 has the letter writer, the representative of those curious about “Dan Emmitt,” asking for Proffit’s agreement to “visit your home,” while a later version – dated 1 April 1991 – backs off that intrusive request, and asks simply for agreement to visit in the Fall. In the 1991 version, the visitors, a larger number of people than Proffit had expected, are arrayed in front of him, whereas in the April 1990 draft, Proffit is merely dealing with their letter alone in his home.

It is not clear, from any other evidence – interviews with those who were familiar with his field work, and discussions with people who knew Tommy’s own scholarly interests and his efforts to seek out source musicians in the company of Henry Glassie, Cece Conway, and others – that Tommy’s own forays into the field to talk to, get to know, and trade tunes with musical elders in the region involved any level of awkwardness of the sort portrayed in the opening act of *The Last Song*. On the contrary, Tommy’s relationship with Tommy Jarrell, for example, was positive, close, friendly – reflecting the open manner in which Jarrell comported himself with all visitors. Tommy’s experience alongside of Cece Conway, and their work together on Conway’s study of African American banjo players in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, including a video of Tommy relaxing with Dink Roberts and his family, suggest a level of camaraderie, a relaxed and friendly, open manner – even though some of those interactions, at least at the outset, were rough and tumble, involved a certain amount of awkwardness and at times some tense moments.

What was Tommy depicting, then, in this standoffish interaction with the folks who wanted to visit John Proffit? Was it his own sense of how the revival, and the revivalists, had essentially turned “visitations” – individual or group approaches to the Appalachian masters at their homes – into invasive, indelicate social science investigations bereft of the warmth he and his more informal colleagues had sought with the source musicians? The two versions of the play, especially Act One, suggest that he saw, at different times, the possibility that the “representatives” would approach Proffit via correspondence, or that they would find their way to his home to explain their interests. Clearly, Proffit has to confront the fact that these people are interested in Dan Emmett, not in Proffit’s own narrative, and that may be part of what is being sorted here – the sense that sometimes, in searching for primary sources, the lives of the other people who filled out the life of the music around those original sources, much like Proffit filled out the circle of musicians around Emmitt, were neglected.

Proffit immediately presses his interlocutors beyond their question, pushing aside their request to learn about Dan Emmett, and urging them to be inquisitive instead about Uncle Joe – “Isn’t that what you came for? The 1990 formulation of his parrying thrust becomes “Isn’t that why you came here” in the 1991 version. This essentially moves things from a sense that his visitors had a concrete expectation associated with the visit (“what you came for”) to a sense of purpose, a more inquisitive starting point (“why you came here”).

These differences between the 1990 and the 1991 version are interesting script changes that in some ways may speak to Tommy’s own arrival in Chapel Hill, and the suspicions - lack of “trust” - regarding the authenticity of the songs, the words, that he heard when he first started listening to old time music. An early 1990s essay that Tommy penned about his path to Chapel Hill talks about the earliest part of his musical trajectory:

In the early 50’s I bought records by Burl Ives, Leadbelly, and The Inkspots. At high school dances, there was Ray Charles on 45s or live bands with the same sound. Later on I became a folk boomer, bought a guitar, and learned to strum from the "Burl Ives Song Book." In New Orleans in 1961, I bought a five-string banjo and went to work with Pete Seeger’s book. I listened to his records and to the Weavers, Odetta, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, and Joan Baez. There was every kind of stuff in the folk boom--pop and politics, existential campfire songs, collegiate rah-rah, you name it. I liked the "folksongs" best, though I came to mistrust the singing. Why did it sound so Carnegie Hall, when the songs were strictly Barn Dance? Where’d those songs come from anyway?¹⁸

Tommy’s own efforts to explain his energetic attempt to get at the hearts and souls of source musicians is quite probably reflected in the two slight differences in the “John Proffit” scripts. The slight shift in language between the two versions represented his attempt, unconscious or not, to recreate the moment that the question he asked brought him to the Durham-Chapel Hill area. “Wouldn’t you rather see what Uncle Joe saw?” in the 1990 version of the play becomes the more declaratory “Don’t you want to see what Uncle Joe saw” in the 1991 version, suggesting a level of impatience rather than a courteous invitation to go along with John Proffit’s proposed course of action.

The Philosophy of The Last Song, The Prophecy of Proffit

In the midst of taking notes on business practices in the mid-19th century - patronage, stocks, inventory, variables regarding business success, and the fate of individual businessmen, things he was interested in as a way of lending authenticity to the staging of the play - Tommy paused to outline the kinds of enduring philosophical issues that occurred to him in this context, noting “God versus evil,” “right action,” and sacred

¹⁸ Thompson, Tommy, “Coming to Hollow Rock,” 1992.

<http://www.earlyblurs.com/tommyhrs.htm>

versus practical.” Other things made him think of loneliness and the longing for fellowship as a theme that would preoccupy people in the time and place described by John Proffit’s existence. In the midst of taking research notes on frontier camp meetings, Methodist folklore and the life of the “free Negro” in North Carolina, and on dancing and “patting Juba,” Tommy jotted down musings that suggested he was drawn to notions of prayer and communication with God, the “indifference of nature,” preoccupation with “things that are not true,” and the wisdom in “the elementary deficiencies of existence” - themes or ideas, or puzzles, that would have confronted the likes of John Proffit.

Tommy worked out a lot of the core challenges confronting John Proffit - the central philosophical, social, moral and political issues that would have prompted Proffit to stop and think – in snatches of dialogue assigned to the character. In one note to himself, he wondered whether Proffit should have “cleared out” on the very first night of his duet with Dan Emmett. He also wondered, in writing, about the impossibility of knowing God’s mind - “Nobody knows what God thinks – and what that said about good and evil, musing in the form of a piece of dialogue: “What makes you think you and God have the same notion of what’s good.”¹⁹ Tommy put the thought in John Proffit’s head: “Why would God make us so that we need answers to unanswerable questions?” and he suggested, in writing, “If there is no God, how can anything have real value?” These are not necessarily the sorts of questions that John Proffit ended up thinking, in any of the draft versions of the play, but these appear to have been Tommy’s sense of the kinds of things that would occur to people in Proffit’s circumstances, in his position, confronting the realities that greeted mid-19th century man with regularity.

Tommy’s notes about various drafts of elements of the play, and notes to himself about dialogue - as well as bibliographic citations of publications consulted in the process of writing the play - were often infused with thoughts that bear relationships to Western philosophical traditions or are easily associated with a philosophical approach that may have animated Tommy at one point or another in his life. A number of those notes that used such philosophical terms of reference date from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, and take the form of assertions, propositions, or hypothetical questions, such as these:

- A just deity would never permit the evil of society.
- If there is no god, there is no standard of good and evil: one may as well do as one pleases.
- If a man’s greed can give value, market value, to a piece of land or a human life, then likewise, his grace can confer upon them sanctity. He can give them spiritual value.

¹⁹ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folder 6, Early notes, drafts, reading lists, overlooked gems of wisdom, etc., Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Tommy described the philosophical core messages of “The Last Song” in these terms, referencing ideas that he read and wrote about during his decade as a graduate student in the University of North Carolina’s Department of Philosophy. The tension between the idea of relativistic and individualized notions of good and evil, in the absence of a god, and the idea of spiritual value deriving from greed - ideas that informed Frederick Nietzsche’s *Ecee Homo* - and the absence of justice as the basis for an argument against the existence of god – both of those were familiar to Tommy as arguments closely studied during the mid-1960s to the early 1970s in his graduate school.²⁰ Tommy may have devised the inventory of challenges confronting the characters in the play as he read through source material - period piece autobiographies, diaries and journals from the era, accounts of travel and other contemporaneous documents. He would pause after the entry of a title to a book, and its author, or a cryptic reference to a phrase that caught his fancy, and he would write out an inventory of ideas and their conceptual starting points. In notes that might date from the mid 1980s, in one exercise of this written “free association” regarding John Proffit, Tommy referenced specific guilt, unnecessary guilt, deception, essential dependence, unnatural respect, in what was essentially a written exercises of “free association;” he sometimes tied those to individual writers or thinkers, in this instance Balzac and Rabelais, with no specific anchor to a published work or specific idea held by those thinkers.²¹

In notebooks that Tommy kept in the period from 1984 to 1989, he struggled with ideas that he seemed to think would have animated John Proffit, lurked under his actions, or informed his decisions. Tommy fastened on the extent to which fate, for man, comes in the form of events that cannot be foreseen or controlled – “We’re always vulnerable to what happens next.” The ambiguity of his notes suggested that a lot of this vulnerability was interior to man, the result of “what happens next in ourselves.” At this point in his jottings, he paired his thinking of vulnerability to the notion that “we’re all clowns” - there is a randomness, an uncontrolled element to our lives that derives from our character alone. On these few pages, he framed the problem of what energized John Proffit as having to do with what motivates “the man who leaves.” He asked: “So why not leave?” This, he seemed to think, would explain Proffit’s “quietness,” born of the question “why speak?” and “to whom” one might speak in the midst of this impulse to

²⁰ 25 September 2017 (1:01 P.M.) email from Mark Robert Nixon to Lew Stern; 25 September 2017 (11:42 A.M.) email from Bill Hicks to Lew Stern. Both Nixon and Hicks were graduate students in philosophy at the University of North Carolina; their tenure as students overlapped with Tommy’s time at the school.

²¹ Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folder 6, John Proffit: Early notes, drafts, reading lists, overlooked gems of wisdom, etc., Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

quietness. Here, interestingly, he jotted down a note to himself, separated from his musings about fate by lines drawn across the page of his notebook that framed the instruction: “Read all of Virgil Aldrich,” the professor at Kenyon who motivated him to shift his attention to the discipline of philosophy, and probably enticed him to move to Chapel Hill to pursue graduate studies.

After wrestling with those notions, Tommy penned the phrase, on a clean page: “If your train’s on the wrong track, every station you come to is the wrong station.” Here, he seemed to be looking for a way to capture for himself an understanding of the kind of life that might derive from all this thinking about fate and vulnerability. “Proffit,” he wrote, “must wrestle with something cold and big – wet out of the river.” It is hard not to conjure the image of a baptized man struggling to his feet, finding his bearings after being submerged – is that what Tommy thought John Proffit would confront? Tommy goes on to write: “The wild begins where you least expect it: one step off your daily course.” The statement goes back to Tommy’s focus on a man’s set trajectory, his notion of the train track that shapes one’s path, and the extent to which, even with the sturdy and dependable direction that laboriously laid track might suggest, there is room for the unexpected not at all far from the predetermined track. Tommy goes on to frame this in a triad of concepts: love, death, control. He does not dwell on that triad in his notes at that point, but pauses to paint a verbal picture of the character:

Proffit turns his face downward looks at people as he speaks to them, under his brow. His jaw is too big – so are his ears. He had trouble looking like a Harvard professor.²²

Tommy asked two more questions at this point in these three pages of notes, before he drifted off in another direction in these notes - in this instance, a reminder to himself to consult *The Scrabble Word Guide*. The first question he posed as “another problem for Proffit” - using one of the several alternate spellings for the name that appear at points in his writing. That question, he stated, was “How do we raise our arms?” This might be a reference to moving Proffit from thought to action. He did not linger on that idea, but quickly highlighted, with lines across the page, the idea of knowledge and belief, asking “Can a person know only one thing?”

Tommy commented on the core challenges or philosophical puzzles that confronted Proffit in his notes, and mulled them over in his mind, dwelled on how to shape the script in a way that might enable him to straddle all of these issues – he seemed to want to avoid singling out a manageable few of these challenges that might have made it easier to

²² Subseries 1.1: The Last Song of John Proffitt, Folders 8, 9, and 10, Notebooks, Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Interestingly, in this notebook entry, Tommy first drafted the phrase as: “He had trouble looking like a Harvard student,” but crossed out “student” and substituted “professor.”

see the stark contrasts and binary choices that added up to John Proffit's life. However, to Tommy, that might have provided only a one-dimensional view of his main character.

The Proffit Model

Tommy's "The Last Song of John Proffit," and the planning and research work that Tommy initiated for a project he planned on Charlie Poole, seemed to have become something of a model for projects on musicians that friends and colleagues contemplated. His own script and lyric writing work for theatre seemed also to have drawn colleagues to him with questions on how to proceed with such projects.

For example, in July 1992, the West Virginian musician John Lilley wrote to Tommy, outlining an idea for a stage project on Jimmy Rodgers. Lilley thanked Tommy for encouraging him to "put his thoughts down on paper" – advice which goes to the point that Tommy thought out loud, in writing, through his notes, including the scraps of paper, the block quotes, the partial references to important ideas and the record of melodious lines that struck him and caught his attention. Tommy constructed his projects out of an edifice of ideas that were like stack stones, irregular in fit but ultimately compatible as a wall. This 1992 letter from Lilley seems to suggest that he encouraged others to begin that way, too.²³

Once he sorted through his own ideas, Lilley focused on "theatre production planning," realizing that he lacked experience in this area, and that the key question for him was how "big" a production should be. He turned to Tommy for help on that score, and outlined several "models" for such a venture, from a "Have-Guitar-Will-Travel" one man show that focused on Rodgers' singing in a casual, "festival workshop" sort of way, to a legitimate theatre format that employed a cast of performers and was carefully blocked and staged, and focused more on the biographic contours of his life and career. A middle ground alternative, dubbed "A Night with Jimmy Rodgers," was, in Lilley's description, a "time capsule" recreation of what a 1930s audience might have seen live, at a Jimmy Rodgers local theatre or tent show performance.

Tommy's work with source musicians, his concert performance work with a touring band, and his writing and theatre experience put him in a position to answer questions fixed on the aesthetics, and the practical dimensions, confronting someone contemplating a creative work featuring the life and music of a performer such as Jimmy Rodgers. His own attempt to frame a project on Charlie Poole, and his laborious efforts to shape "The

²³ Lilley wrote to Tommy: "I realized that I was of several minds about which way to go with it, and writing it all down helped me to hone down to basically three options." Letter from John Lilley to Tommy Thompson, 15 July 1992, in the personal files of Jessica Thompson, Durham, North Carolina. Lilley sent Tommy a copy of his article, "Jimmy Rodgers," *Old Time Herald*, Spring 1992, pp. 7 – 9. John Lilley did not recall this letter, and did not have a recollection of a correspondence with Tommy. 28 September 2017 Facebook message from John Lilley to Lew Stern.

Last Song of John Proffit” equipped him to speak to issues of format, the mix of storytelling and “stage patter,” the requirements for specialized technical support and casts including performers, dancers, musicians, comedians, emcees. Tommy’s work in theatre gave him the chance to think about how one moves from idea and inspiration, to writing a script, and then to the practical realities of staging a production.

It appears that Tommy did discuss in specifics of stage work with others who had experience in this area, such as Stephen Wade, who recalled chats with Tommy in the 1980s about the nature of the work involved in mounting a one-man show.²⁴ He appears to have engaged in dialogue on the process of going from script to stage, the nature of “stage presence,” the way to hold an audience’s attention. He sought views on the question to practical production issues, and more creative ones - how to move from an inspiration or idea to a script, from a script to a practical staging for a production. He delved into details and substance on matters of the sort that John Lilley raised with Tommy.

Tommy’s careful focus on the multivariate nature of theatre productions and stage work was reflected in the way “The Last Song of John Proffit” evolved.

Tommy’s Unfinished Play on Charlie Poole

Kinney Rorrer, a scholar and performer steeped in the three-finger banjo style popularized by Charlie Poole, memorialized the music of Poole, a recording artist for Columbia Records in the 1920s and 30s, in a 1992 biography.²⁵ Poole married Kinney Rorrer’s great aunt, Lou Emma, the sister of Poole’s fiddler, Posey Rorer.²⁶ Kinney Rorrer remembered that sometime in the early 1990s, Tommy phoned him and made arrangements to visit Rorrer at his home in Danville, Virginia, to talk about a play that Tommy hoped to write about Charlie Poole, in the voice of Posey Rorer.²⁷

²⁴ 24 September 2017 (10:30 A.M.) email from Stephen Wade to Lew Stern.

²⁵ Rorrer, *Rambling Blues: The Life and Songs of Charlie Poole*, Danville, Virginia: McCain Printing, 1992. Also see Rorrer, “Posey Rorer of Franklin County, Virginia, *Old Time Herald*, (Volume 11, Number 2), December 2007/January 2008, pp. 30 – 36. http://www.oldtimeherald.org/archive/back_issues/volume-11/11-2/rorer.html

²⁶ Kinney Rorrer stated that Posey Rorer spelled his name “Posey” and he spelled last name with 3 “r’s” as opposed to 4 “r’s” – Kinney Rorrer’s father added the 4th “r” in the 1930’s. Kinney pointed out that Rorrer with 4 “r’s” is the more common spelling in Patrick County, Virginia, where his great-grandfather (Posey’s father) was from. 19 July 2016 (8:40 A.M.) email from Kinney Rorrer to Lew Stern.

²⁷ Tommy appeared to have talked to few friends and musical colleagues about his plans and intentions for the play about Charlie Poole. Mac Benford recalled discussing the project with Tommy, and offering to share with Tommy his own interview notes for a

Rorrer recalled that Tommy phoned several times to get directions to his home, and ended up much delayed in getting to his home, suggesting that this coincided with the timeframe in which Tommy's memory began to fail him. The meeting did take place. Rorrer remembered that Tommy carrying a copy of Bland Simpson's book, *The Mystery of Beautiful Nell Cropsey*, which he appeared to view as a model for the sort of thing he hoped to accomplish for his Charlie Poole project. Tommy gave his copy to Rorrer during the visit.²⁸

That book clearly inspired Tommy, Rorrer recalled, and he wanted to build his story using a similar framework, telling about Poole's life through Posey Rorer, recounting how they met, the nature of their friendship and musical collaboration, and their "escapades" in their musical life.

Tommy's Inspiration

Simpson's book, "a nonfiction novel," wove description of local realities, historical fact, and folklore into narrative context and speculative dialogue between the players in that murder mystery. Simpson found an exact balance between the details of geography, local color, effective description of the local economy and job market, historical fact and esoteric detail that helped capture the language of local people wondering out loud, in small knots of factory floor personnel, about gossip, hearsay, and news regarding the 1901 disappearance of Nell Cropsey.

Tommy had worked his way through many of these issues in "The Last Song," figuring out the equation for a one person play built around a real figure: how much should be fact, how much should be fancy, how to make dialogue credible and relevant to enough of what was then current grist for the mill. Tommy determined for himself what worked best in a play that sought to take historical characters and develop dialogue around them in a way that did not project contemporary conceptions onto issues from a bygone time. He used local geography, news of the day, and expressions that situated his character,

book on Poole that Benford had thought about undertaking; Benford's band had worked up a lot of Poole material, and Benford had spent some time in the South interviewing people with connections to Poole. That was around the time that Kinney Rorrer had begun work on his book about Poole, suggesting that Tommy may have conceived the idea for his one person play about Poole as early as 1981 or 1982. 12 November 2017 (5:26 P.M.) email from Mac Benford to Lew Stern. Benford's band at the time was Dr. Humbead's New Tranquility Stringband and Medicine Show - often called just "Humbeads" and later shortened to simply the New Tranquility Stringband. 18 November 2017 (11:00 A.M.) email from Mac Benford to Lew Stern.

²⁸ Author's notes, interview with Kinney Rorrer (conducted via telephone), Danville, Virginia, 18 July 2016, 10:30 A.M. – 11:10 A.M.

John Proffit, firmly in the appropriate time. Tommy was attentive to choosing ways of having that character talk that had enough of an archaic taste to make clear where in time Proffit was rooted.

It is instructive to look at how Bland Simpson managed these writing issues in his approach to the “nonfiction novel” format that was attractive enough to Tommy to enter into discussion as a possible model for the play he envisioned about Charlie Poole.

First, Simpson was attentive to the details of topography, and dwelled on the realities of roads, rivers, and settlement patterns, factories, housing, businesses, and how they sprung up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, evolved over time, wound around each other to become communities that attracted northerners like the Cropsey family.

Second Simpson was measured and careful about the dialogue he deployed in his book, balancing it with narration, and dotting the pages of his work with multiple voices, articulately introduced and given their own way of talking so that the multiple characters have their own sound, and can enter and leave the landscape of the book with ease, in a way that is comfortable and not confusing.

Third, the multiple voices of the various characters have different textures that, framed by the structure put in place by the narrative, pushed the story along, providing momentum, and connecting things neatly and crisply. His characters, in their own distinctive ways, talked in a clipped, direct, straightforward ways that established their authenticity as simple, essential country folk, or as self-confident urbanites with money, and perhaps schooling or life experience that made them stand out. Simpson moved the spotlight continuously between the characters, circling back around from one to another of a dozen or so people who figured in the book as main players, giving each sufficient voice, over time making plain just what role they had in the story he was telling.

Fourth, the narrative that emerged covered a very specific terrain that was the basis for the story of the disappearance of Nell Cropsey, but it also bumped into news of the day that helped anchor the events in Elizabeth City in time and space – the Wright Brothers make a brief appearance, the implementation of national prohibition laws help frame the local realities, the lingering impact of the civil war three decades after the hostilities ended intrude on life in this Pasquotank County town.

These, and other aspects of Simpson’s approach to his book, very possibly caught Tommy’s attention, both as the result of the deft way Simpson managed to tell this tale, and the extent to which some of the choices that Simpson made represented matters Tommy had to manage in telling John Proffit’s story. Quite probably, Tommy would have looked at Simpson’s approach to the act of creatively blurring line between nonfiction and fiction as a sound model for another writing venture of his own.

There is some indication, in Tommy’s notes about the planned play, that he envisioned this as something more than a one-person performance. His notebooks contain draft dialogue that suggest Tommy may have thought about populating the play with numerous

characters, but over time he moved toward the idea that Posey Rorer would be the single voice, the single person, to inhabit the stage. It is possible, though, that he looked at the manner in which Simpson developed his story around multiple people and envisioned constructing a script that involved multiple characters who would appear in their own moments, in a tapestry of soliloquies conveyed by narration in much the way Simpson's book is structured.

Tommy's Meeting with Kinney Rorrer

Rorrer recalled that his meeting with Tommy focused mostly on the "business dimension" of Tommy's plan. Tommy was extremely attentive to Kinney Rorrer's intellectual property and wanted to make sure that anything on which he drew from Kinney's book and other knowledge would be credited. "I was touched by his feeling that he wanted to make sure my legal rights [were honored], and that I was compensated," Rorrer recalled. Tommy, Rorrer remembered, was honest and straightforward about his intentions, and interviewed Rorrer on his knowledge of Charlie Poole. Tommy visited a second time, in the company of a woman, whose identity is not clarified in any of his notes. He went over substantially the same ground, focusing on protecting Rorrer's rights as author of the Poole biography on which Tommy would draw, and on using the material Rorrer had amassed on Charlie Poole "correctly." By that time, Tommy had begun manifesting the symptoms of the illness that sidelined him, and eventually took his life, so the project did not move forward.²⁹

Rorrer knew Tommy's music, and the music of the Red Clay Ramblers, having attended concerts and seen them performing at festivals and fiddler's conventions. "I always loved their music," he noted, and thought it was a great, refreshing music that represented the best in old time traditional string band ensemble playing. "I knew that if anybody could do this" – write a cogent script about Charlie Poole – that Tommy Thompson was "the right one" from the perspective of his musical capabilities, and his work as a writer. Rorrer suggested that Tommy shared the sense that Charlie Poole was a fascinating character, and that the Poole relationship with Posey Rorer was intricate and interesting enough to sustain the attention of an audience. Poole, Rorrer mused, "couldn't read a stop sign." He had a real thick rural North Carolinian accent, and he could not write his name, but he was bold enough and confident enough to travel to New York, knock on the door of a record company, and ask for a recording contract. "Tommy Thompson must have sensed that," Rorrer said, suggesting that some artifact of Tommy's West Virginia upbringing gave Tommy an empathetic feeling toward these two characters.³⁰

²⁹ Rorrer remembered a letter he received from Tommy's daughter, Jessica, following Tommy's passing, in which she expressed her desire to follow through with her father's dream of doing a play about Charlie Poole. Author's notes, interview with Kinney Rorrer (conducted via telephone), Danville, Virginia, 18 July 2016, 10:30 A.M. – 11:10 A.M.

³⁰ Author's notes, interview with Kinney Rorrer (conducted via telephone), Danville, Virginia, 18 July 2016, 10:30 A.M. – 11:10 A.M. Interestingly enough, Kinney Rorrer

Progress on The Poole Project

Tommy got much further along toward a flying start in this project than many of his friends, colleagues and family recalled. While he did not quite get to the point of having outlined a structure for a play on Charlie Poole, as told through the voice of Posey Rorer, or devised a vision of and objective for a stage production, he did generate significant notes, and on the basis of those notes he began imagining dialogue, relationships, challenges, issues that would feed into a story about Charlie Poole. He did begin to write about the kinds of things that would inform a one-man play. He started shaping role he wanted Posey Rorer to play as the narrating voice, the central character that would galvanize the play and focus the project on the person of Charlie Poole. Tommy began plucking elements from Charlie Poole's biography that would help animate the story he wanted to develop.

Tommy took extensive notes from Kinney Rorrer's book on Poole, copying down sections in a bound notebook according to themes that got at various parts of Poole's life: comments by Poole's first wife, details regarding his parents' backgrounds, Poole's family's basic lineage.³¹ He took careful notes, from the Rorrer biography, on the minutia of daily life in the Poole family's home – pine wood floors and linoleum, no indoor plumbing, a small kitchen garden. He appeared to be particularly captivated by the hijinks of the Poole family boys who in their youth managed to get into trouble all around the Haw River community, and how Charlie Poole turned pranks into an art form in his adulthood.

Tommy took note regarding Poole's uneasy relationship to religion - his occasional church attendance as a child, his recognition of the right behavior demanded in the presence of preachers (including his brother Ralph, who grew up to be a "sanctified holiness preacher"). Tommy copied down sections of Rorrer's book documenting the musicians rambling ways - his habit of taking off for weeks and weeks at a time, often at crucial moments for the family in terms of life events and financial challenges – and his

mentioned that the recording company got the titles of two of the tunes Poole recorded wrong because they could not penetrate Poole's thick accent. Rorrer told me the story of Charlie Poole boldness and the confidence it took for a southerner to travel to New York, and push beyond the linguistic difficulties of communicating in the big city after I sought clarification of his reference to "Lint Heads," a derogatory term reserved for cotton mill workers dating from his childhood. He offered this clarification when it became evident from my queries that I could not fathom what he was saying, try as I did to filter his Virginian accent through my Brooklyn way of hearing English.

³¹ Subseries 2.4, Notebooks, Folder 58, Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

less than conventional approach to the occasional odd jobs he was able to hold down for short runs. Tommy looked closely at what Rorrer had to say about where Charlie Poole learned banjo, how early on in his life he took up playing, and the way those early teachers influenced the tunes and the playing style to which Poole gravitated. He jotted down notes to himself suggesting the possibility that one of Poole's early influences insofar as banjo playing was concerned, a certain Daner Johnson, was himself a wanderer, may have joined the circus at a young age, and could possibly have been a minstrel himself, as Tommy remarked in his notes.³² Tommy noted, parenthetically, that Johnson probably played in a late minstrel style, and that during his own brief performing life Charlie Poole tuned his banjo in the preferred minstrel style from that period. Tommy also copied out the section of this chapter that spoke to an early banjo contest in which Johnson secured first place, beating out Fred Van Eps by playing *Dixie*, and how the gold-plated banjo donated by Stewart Company as the contest prize was very quickly stolen from him – perhaps a nod of recognition by Tommy to the fate of some of his own instruments.

Tommy's notes consisted of large chunks of paragraphs from Rorrer's book, interspersed with remarks and questions he asked himself set off from the copied text in parentheses. He followed that practice for 13 pages, printing out elements of chapters that were particularly relevant to him, cramming the minute details of events captured in the book, and the broad strokes of Poole's life, into notebooks.

He singled out the way Poole reportedly learned tunes, on a gourd banjo that he made himself – before he got his first store bought banjo for \$1.50. Poole sequestered himself in a room and would play a single tune repeatedly until he had perfected his playing. Tommy appeared to have been intrigued by a comparison between the North Carolina Ramblers and the Skillet Lickers. He noted repertoire that was common to public performances in school assemblies and community events where music was called for. He also paid close attention to the way musicians came up in the local scene, where they learned their music, from whom they took "lessons," what entangling alliances and close relationships emerged among like-minded contemporaries, how they managed to cobble together bands, and how all that had an impact on the swath they cut in one town or another. At times, his partly verbatim notes culled from Rorrer's book read like a "Who Begat Who" of musicians in eastern North Carolina.

Tommy also jotted down notes regarding the extent to which white musicians might have learned some of their tunes, or instrumental work, from black banjo or fiddle players. He noted the dynamics of social and economic change in the region where Charlie Poole lived, the way textile and tobacco industry vied for the top place as the engine of growth and employment in the first decades of the 1900s. He was attentive to the names of musicians in the area where Poole grew up, lived and worked – and the kinds of money they made from performing at dances and busking. He was also attentive to the

³² Kinney Rorrer, *Rambling Blues: The Life and Songs of Charlie Poole*, (Danville, Virginia: McCain Printing, 1992), p. 17.

newspaper stories about musical events in the early and mid-1920s that Rorrer referenced in his narrative and copied down stories that spoke about local events hosted by or merely held at various places of employment, cotton mills, for example.

He appeared to be especially interested in the slowing growing interest in country music and string bands, how community support for local music classes, clubs, choruses and bands developed momentum in the first two decades of the 19th century. He was attentive to the unique styles of early musicians, the way they were partial to playing slow music for “rustic dances,” and the manner in which local fiddlers developed highly individual styles, and reputations, as musicians with singular skills for keeping dancing going, or for playing listening music. He singled out in his notes early indications of Poole’s own performance preferences - Poole, Tommy wrote down, preferred an audience that would listen closely instead of talking through his sets. Tommy copied down Rorrer’s references from his text on Red Patterson, who he had met and was poised to record him just before Patterson died.³³

Tommy also seemed to be attentive to the way people spoke, as reported in Rorrer’s book, in quotes attributed to musicians describing local dances or other performances, and local people remembering such events – he was, it seemed, focused on noting the locution, the grammar, the local preferences for certain expressions or vocabulary. He paid close attention to Poole’s locution, choice of words, and favorite sayings depicted by Rorrer in Poole’s biography, first published in 1982, and reprinted in 1992.³⁴

Tommy lingered over a 1927 photograph of four musicians that made up the band Red Patterson and the Piedmont Log Rollers, remarking about the setting – the photo was taken in front of a porch – in particular detail, capturing the “props” and the flora and fauna that composed the background and foreground, noting details that would not necessarily be apparent without a close, scrutinizing examination of every inch of the

³³ Tommy Thompson interviewed by Jack Bernhardt, FS-4686 A, in the Jack Bernhardt Papers (20061), Southern Folklife Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Interestingly, Patterson’s sister babysat for the young Kinney Rorrer. Rorrer stated: “I recall staying at her home when I was around 5 years old and my mother told me that Red would be there sometimes when she would come to pick me up. He was a local house painter then. I really wish I could recall him. I did not find out where he had moved until a few years after his death.” 15 October 2017 (7:22 P.M.) email from Kinney Rorrer to Lew Stern. Sometime in the late 1970s, Red Patterson’s widow told Kinney Rorrer that she met Red for the first time when she attended a dance around Cascade, Virginia back in the 1920s. “She said that Red and Charlie Poole were playing twin banjos at the dance and even recalled that the tune they were playing as a duet was ‘Sweet Sunny South’.” 16 October 2017 (8:27 A.M.) email from Kinney Rorrer to Lew Stern.

³⁴ It is not clear whether Tommy worked from the 1982 or the 1992 printing of Kinney Rorrer’s book. 15 October 2017 (7:22 P.M.) email from Kinney Rorrer to Lew Stern.

photograph; that must have struck Tommy in the way a well-staged theatre set would have, and he commented on the placement of these elements, the poses and postures of the musicians, with a considerable level of attentiveness to every scrap of information that might be wrung from that black and white picture.³⁵

The Deep End of the Poole

At this point, 25 pages into focused note taking, and well-armed with details, insights and information derived from Rorrer's book, Tommy launched into a reverie, imagining his way through a first-person narrative in the voice of Posey Rorer on how he met Charlie Poole.

Tommy took some slight liberties with those facts - he had Poole and Rorrer meeting for the first time in 1925 instead of 1918, for example, perhaps for the sake of some dramatic symmetry, or the way one year sounds more assertive, and more likely to linger once pronounced. This might suggest that Tommy had managed to find a point of access to the poetry of the key characters and their relationships, enabling him to move toward constructing an imaginative soliloquy that would help drive him toward the character he wanted to shape, and the situation, the theatric moment, he wanted that character to occupy. "The day I met Charlie Poole," Tommy has Posey say, "was otherwise perfect," thus starting out with a line that cracked and sizzled, and make people think quickly. He continued:

If I'd written all this down at the time, I could have said the exact date. It was 1925, I know that, and I'd say around the first of May. The sun was beaming down on that big white house we were living in and made even clapboard look like it was drawn by an artist.

Tommy went on to weave a picture of a front porch that resembled what he saw in the photo of Red Patterson and his band in the Rorrer book, the picture to which he was so attentive in his note taking. Something had clicked in his mind, and he was shaping scenes and envisioning possibilities, moving quickly from the realm of fact finding to creativeness, calling on a blue sky, mossy ground, budding leaf trees between the house and the road, and a floor of fine soft, sandy soil, perfect for ant lions. Tommy goes on for two handwritten looseleaf pages, setting up Charlie Poole's entry onto the porch, and Posey Rorer's first encounter with the man he'd make music with for some years. He takes Posey through some paces, showing him to be preoccupied with a lady friend, inclined to be single minded, and not at all reluctant to do what it would take to keep his mind from wandering, before stopping work for the day. By the time he returned to the notebook, Tommy had shifted gears and was back at work, fiddling around with aspects of "The Last Song."

³⁵ Rorrer, *Rambling Blues*, p. 23.

At some point, he skipped several pages and resumed working on the Charlie Poole project, picking up the narrative – in Posey Rorer’s voice again – at the point of Poole’s first trip to New York with Posey to record for Okeh. He wove a picture of Posey, with money in his pockets and not a thing to do until Monday morning, encountering a chorus line girl, falling for her, and then seeing Charlie’s magnetism work its magic, derailing Posey’s plans. Tommy starts and stops, and starts the narrative several times, each time re-writing his way to the point where he needs some momentum to get over a slight bump in the road, a bit of tough topography in the story that required him to back up and find his way comfortably to the place where he wanted the yarn to end. Each time, Tommy added a bit more drapery to the scene, giving the showgirl identity as a woman from Atlanta, and bestowing a name that could either only belong to a showgirl, or be entirely fictitious. He spent another page of draft narrative moving Charlie from the corners of the story to the center, displacing Posey and making off this the showgirl. To accomplish this, Tommy reached back to the sort of hijinks that were Charlie Poole’s signature as a youth, actions that matured into pranks often accompanied by a wager and aimed at a pleasing a crowd. Tommy wrote these moments up in layered ways, fixing close attention on details – the tiles of the men’s room, Posey’s preoccupation with his club foot – and succinctly telegraphing the action that boxes up the moment and has Charlie far away from the scene once it becomes clear what mischief he achieved under the supposedly watchful eyes of band mates.

So, twenty five pages of notes into the project, Tommy turned from recording the facts and figures that define Poole’s basic biography, and shifted to attempting to narrate his way through aspects of the tale that he wanted to have figure in the stage play somehow, focusing on coming up with some ideas that would scan neatly into some sort of dialogue, or lend themselves to a good tune. Tommy jotted down some *bon mots* ascribed to Charlie or others during those first years as a band, and tried to move these into position so that they might lend themselves to a coherent lyric worthy of a melody: “They say it takes all kinds to make a world, but I don’t believe it;” “She loves him dearly, sees him clearly;” and “Twist my arm – you wouldn’t have to twist it very far.” He paused, between lines, and wondered, for example, “why are we so thrilled to see actually what before we’d only seen pictures of?” and pondered the fate of the stories of textile mill workers, like Poole and his friends: “The words are wound around themselves in balls of yarn spun in these mills. Stories of what happened – what might have happened. What should have happened.” Here, he shifted to more concrete considerations: how the principle characters might have approached the issue of financing a band of their own; the growing musical sophistication of more complex bands that transcended the music of earlier string bands by adding pump organs, brass, and orchestral elements; how bands would begin to feel pressure from record companies to move in one direction or another, perhaps toward a musical “purity” – or some other record company perception of what might make recorded music commercially lucrative.

At this juncture, Tommy took stock of Charlie Poole, who – he wrote – had an inability to tolerate boredom, could not be left alone, perceived hostility from many quarters. The script he envisioned would have to grapple with the notion of dreamed success, the role of “money, influence, and popularity” in shaping personal expectations regarding levels

of achievement. In cryptic notes, Tommy thought about where two African-American banjo players, Dink Roberts and James Roberts - who he had met in the Piedmont area while working with Cece Conway, his second wife, who was writing a book on their music - might have had to cope with some of these aspects of a musical life. Tommy appeared to have wondered whether there was something relevant about "the story of Gary Lewis," presumably a reference to a contemporary parallel. The manner in which these thoughts begin to bump into one another, and the way strands of thought end up unconnected to what appeared to be the trajectory of an idea, suggest the manner in which Tommy was losing the capacity to focus, concentrate, and to drive home his idea. These sorts of symptoms of a possible problem prompted Tommy to announce his decision to leave the Red Clay Ramblers in 1994. He succumbed to Alzheimer's disease in 2003.

Shaping the Poole Play

Few of Tommy's notebooks were explicitly dated. Some of what he wrote in notebooks could be placed in relative proximity to events, such as a Red Clay Rambler gig or travel to a show, but for the most part his drafting work in notebook were not dated. These first 27 pages of handwritten notes in one undated notebook may have been written around the time Tommy headed off to Danville, Virginia, to meet with Kinney Rorrer in the early 1990s, if only because he seemed to have read the biography by the time he met Rorrer, and he was intent during that visit on according Rorrer proper recognition and compensation for the use of his intellectual property in whatever theatrical property Tommy would end up devising about Charlie Poole.

Five typed pages, followed by six handwritten pages, exist in another file in the University of North Carolina's Wilson Library, in folders that come after the first notebook in which Tommy made an effort to accumulate information about Charlie Poole, and attempted to build story line around Posey Rorer.

It is hard to tell whether these, too, were completed before the first trip to Danville to meet Kinney Rorrer, though since they resemble efforts to draw on basic facts to embroider a story that would hold water as a theatrical play, they may reflect Tommy's confidence that he had Rorrer's agreement to go ahead with his plans for a play about Poole, and thus they might have been written after his second trip to Rorrer's home. Tommy might have felt himself on sturdy enough ground, given the "business" aspects he discussed with Rorrer, to go ahead and be creative, as long as he credited Rorrer for material derived from the biography.

That cannot be said with any certainty, but it does seem that with this second tranche of notes and dialogue Tommy had moved in the direction of doing the writing work necessary to take what he knew and turn it into a play that reflected what he felt about Poole and the issues of the day, the music of the time, and the challenges that motivated Poole and his music.

In the typewritten pages, Tommy took steps - still in the voice of Posey Rorrer - aimed at teasing out the character and nature of Charlie Poole. Tommy focused on Charlie as the eternal prankster, an inveterate performer and an avid pleaser of crowds always willing to rise to the occasion, taking center stage, anywhere, for any reason. In the first page, first paragraph, Tommy captured more than just Poole's magnetism, his special way with a crowd. He painted a picture of a man who had a manipulative aspect to him, who played with pathos and recognized that it was a quick way to an ultimately saddening humor that started with a laugh, and ended with a contemplative moment – just enough time for him to exit untouched by that mood:

Charlie doesn't know I'm writing all this down. Charlie doesn't know a whole lot of things. Or doesn't care, which is the same thing. Like the other day when the whole crowd was over by the Merchantile Building drinking and making music, and Charlie got old man Pendergrass's Stetson. Charlie offered to bet him fifty cents he could cut the brim off it and then put it back together just by blowing on it. Well, Billy Pendergrass is no fool. That was a twelve-dollar hat, but you don't want to say 'no' to Charlie Poole in front of a bunch of mill hands. So the old man gave in. [Charlie] cut the crown right out, dropped in in the road, tossed the brim around, got on his knees, and tried to blow that hat back together just like he thought he knew what he was doing. The crowd looked like it wasn't sure who was making a fool out of who, 'til the old man had enough and turned to walk away. Charlie caught him by the wrist, and said, 'wait, Uncle Billy, get your fifty cents. That was supposed to work!' The crowd broke out laughing like it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. They've never been anywhere, and they're not going anywhere, either.³⁶

Tommy appeared to have put some work into polishing the scenes he had envisioned in the notebook in which he had laboriously copied out facts and dates and impressions captured in Kinney Rorrer's book, and then moved quickly to envisioned scenes and situations. He re-wrote the paragraphs he had plotted out in the notebook about the showgirl with whom Posey was flirting prior to Charlie's appearance. They were much tighter in the typewritten version. The second version was laced with the ironic appreciation of how Posey's hard work of positioning himself with an inviting red-headed showgirl in a New York bar room flush with liquid pleasure - "You'd think they'd never heard of prohibition in New York" - was about to be undone once Charlie swept into the room and eyed the attractive lady with whom Posey was locked in pleasant conversation. He added names and places, particulars and subtle details to the equation, retaining control over how the scene unfurled, staying quietly in Posey's mind as he remembered the scene, the promise of a brief adventure with the chorus line dancer, and

³⁶ Subseries 2.3: Miscellaneous Writings, Folder 46, Writings on Charlie Poole, Tommy Thompson Collection, 1970s – 2002, Collection Number 20359, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

the prior clarity of the knowledge that Charlie's showing up would be enough to undo whatever possibilities might have been implicit in the situation.

This was a narrow scene, a short encounter meant to frame the underlying tension that informed the relationship between Charlie Poole and Posey Rorrer - or between Charlie and anyone, the whole world, for that matter. It was the sort of encounter that was probably, in active terms, a brief and uncomplicated moment in a limited space, with much of the engagement taking place in the mind of the narrator. Posey and his chorus girl, Tanzy, are seated in a nondescript bar. The place was flush with bottles of illicit booze. Stilted dialogue is being spoken between a man and a woman with their minds on other things. Charlie walks in, and with unspoken word manages to take control of the situation and remove Tanzy - and any of the possibilities Posey might have imagined - from the realm of what would might be conceivable for Poole's fiddler.

Tommy painted a picture of the moment Posey realized things have spun out of his control in a manner that might have suggested what he was himself confronting as his memory and other facilities began to diminish, to reel out of control and recede before his eyes. Some of this is slightly apparent in the way he crosses out typewritten lines - instead of starting over, and working up the momentum that has, in the past, allowed him to find the right words and blends of phrases, he ended up losing his train of thought, had trouble finding the right word, and was not necessarily able to strike on the correct spelling or keep to a coherent sentence structure. Posey, slightly tipsy, comes to a moment of recognition after both Tanzy and Poole have excused themselves and headed toward the lavatories - the "Necessary" as Poole called it. Posey heads to the bathroom, presumably to verify what he suspected, that both Charlie and Tanzy never intended to powder their noses, but departed the premises together to find momentary pleasure elsewhere:

I leaned against the last stall staring at my feet on the tile floor. [. . .] I began to study the tiles. They were arranged in little chains - little rings. There'd be one in the middle and then a little ring of them right around it. I tried to count how many it took to go all the way around, but I couldn't. I'd get to number two or three, and then everything would change. Whatever tile I'd got to would suddenly get trapped inside its own ring, and I'd have to start over. I sat on the floor and I could feel the pattern shifting under me. I put my thumb on the middle tile, and my fore finger on number one in the chain. Then, using my other fore finger, I began to count, 'two, three, four, . . .' I was in control now, and I could hear my voice bouncing off the bright circling walls . . .

The next documentation of Tommy's work on this project appeared in a spiral notebook, undated, containing four numbered carefully printed pages under the title "Leaving Home" - followed by two handwritten, unnumbered pages of jottings. In the four pages of handwritten text, Tommy attempted to flesh out Posey Rorer's backstory. He recognized the uniqueness of the man's first name and acknowledged the unusual and varying spelling of the family name: "I don't know anything about the Rorer family,

except that there are two branches of us, and that the other branch spells the name with four 'R's' and pretends not to be kin to us."

It seems to be the case that Tommy built a lineage and family history for Posey that relied closely on his own ancestry, or instead confused his past with what he had learned about Posey's own family history. He described what must be presumed to be Posey's maternal family as consisting of the Bullards from the "foggy Virginia highlands":

Her Grandfather, Chester Bullard, was a one-eyed holiness preacher in the thrall of some splintered sect known as the drunkerds [sic]. Old Bullard had found himself a natural pulpit in the form of a high rock over-looking a narrow spot in the New River Gorge. His folks received his message standing on a sandy beach some thirty or forty feet below. Old Bullard had four wives in his lifetime. When one died, he'd bury her in a cave halfway up the cliff. Then marry another one. I never heard anyone say what these women died of. Nor what he died of. I suspect gun shot in his case. That place is still known as Bullard's Rock.

That, though, was the way Tommy recounted to his daughter Jessica what he knew of his own lineage: Chester Bullard married Mary Dunkum, and that union produced a son, William Stone, whose union with Sarah Bill produced a daughter, Mary Bullard, who wed Thomas F. H. Thompson. That union between Thomas F. H. and Mary produced Tommy, and his brother Edwin.³⁷

It is not clear whether Tommy purposefully committed an act of creative appropriation, taking his own and rather colorful family tree as the basis for the Posey character's lineage. Tommy may not have derived enough from Kinney Rorrer's book to assemble a family history of Posey. Information about Posey's ancestry was scant and probably confined to the fact that he was born in September 1891 to W.T. and Lucy Abigail Rorer in Franklin County, Virginia, between the villages of Henry and Ferrum.³⁸ So, Tommy may have been motivated to be inventive at this point, and the Chester Bullard story is certainly colorful enough to stand as an authentic sounding piece of lore describing Rorer family history. The alternative possibility is that by the time he got to the business of shaping a narrative about Posey, as the fabric from which he intended to weave a script that ultimately would be about Charlie Poole, he had already come to the point of initial dysfunction. His memory may have begun to fail at that point.

He did, however, insofar as the four pages written by hand suggest, go on to construct a reasonable facsimile of a back story for Posey, who hailed from people who grew up

³⁷ Author's notes, interview with Jessica Thompson, (conducted via telephone), Durham, North Carolina, 13 June 2016, 5:00 P.M. – 5:42 P.M.

³⁸ Kinney Rorrer, "Posey Rorer of Franklin County, Virginia," *Old Time Herald*, Volume 11, Number 2, December 2007/January 2008, pp. 30 - 36; Kinney Rorrer, "Posey Rorer," *Document Records*, http://www.document-records.com/show_news.asp?articleID=295

working in the textile mills, remembered a high meadow that looked down on the trim white homes of the textile factory laborers, and recollected the self-sufficient log cabin homestead his father built himself. His father, who cleared the farmland on which his family depended, was also a “skilled carver of the walnut and maple and hickory that surrounded our farm.” Page three of the text read:

In the spring we plowed and planted and put by our harvest for winter. We bred the milk cow and butchered the calf. Come first frost, we slaughtered hogs and I are enough pork brains to know what a pig thinks.

Tommy accounted for Posey’s crippled feet, and his father’s gentle encouragement to “learn to bear what can’t be cured.” Enough of that, by itself, must have been material Tommy embroidered from what he knew of the countryside in those days, and supposed about families, especially working farming families, in those hills. He could have reached for his own family story as a firm way to fill out this lineage at the point he ran out of biographic basics and needed a good tale to tell. However, two subsequent pages of notes reflect the extent to which Tommy was no longer able to carry a script forward. His notes broke down, lacked coherence, and required whoever was lending a hand at the time to resurrect some of his thoughts. His handwriting veered toward being indecipherable. There were lapses in basic spelling that reflected something apart from the hurried writing of someone pushing through thoughts, intent on getting the ideas and the pulse of the narrative down without stopping to correct grammatical flaws and spelling issues that emerged in quickly executed sentences. By the time he turned his attention to the item entitled “Leaving Home,” or not long after that, Tommy may have been relying at least in part on someone to write out some of his notes either as a transcription of what he tried to write himself, in a handwriting of diminishing legibility and possibly lessening coherence, or as a transcription of his effort to speak the words he wished to see on paper.

Tommy undertook one more burst of note taking, and drafting work, in one of his bound notebooks, undated, on numbered and lined pages that amounted to seven consecutive pages. He excerpted more pieces from Kinney Rorrer’s biography of Charlie Poole, noting when Posey left farm work for the coal mines, when he became a “good fiddler” - 1917, according to Tommy’s notes. He abstracted sections on Charlie Poole’s first recording attempt, the brief and probably undistinguished business collaboration between Posey and Poole in bootleg whiskey production. He jotted down references in the form of phrases and key words that focused on the points at which that business venture intersected with the efforts of local police to enforce laws against the illegal production and distribution of whiskey. Tommy took note of Kinney Rorrer’s look at the way Poole fell in with a traveling evangelist and recorded in his notebook the elliptical phrase “No Money No Friends,” unpunctuated; perhaps a keyword to which he might have returned had he gotten to the point of writing songs for this project. He filled one page with references to Posey’s coal mining work, and referenced the point at which the random, local music making partnership between Posey and Poole was poised to transition to something more stable and potentially lucrative. At that point, someone else took over the note taking for two pages, and copied out sections on how Poole’s band first came

together, on Poole's penchant for wandering off for weeks at a time, and on another prank ("I'll bet you a dollar," Poole said to a country store owner, "that [I] could jump into an open crate of 24 dozen eggs and not break a single egg."). Tommy resumed writing down things himself, fixing his attention on how Poole learned tunes – painstakingly, through constant repetition – and his penchant for starting fights. At that point in these seven pages, Tommy got a little more help with this note taking work. The portions of the remaining few pages in Tommy's handwriting were reminders of where Poole was born, where he played as a musician, advice Poole offered to musicians just starting out.

Tommy never got beyond the note taking stage, except for the few attempts to capture what he probably saw as benchmark moments that informed Posey's view of Charlie Poole.³⁹ However, he did begin to shape a vision of what a theatrical presentation focused on Poole might have looked like. His work on "The Last Song of John Proffit" suggested a formula of sorts that represented a good way of getting at questions regarding the old musicians, what their lives were like, where their music came from, and where it their creativity might have taken them had they been blessed with more years.

Conclusion

Tommy's communication, written and spoken, was characterized by fluency, simplicity, and thoughtfulness. He tended to be very careful, very cerebral in mulling over possibilities before his organized thoughts emerged, in writing or in speech.

His language, his lyrics and his dialogue written for stage, resembled the music he played. That is, he played music in an original, inventive way, in an approach that accomplished banjo players still describe as a melding of the best of a rhythmic, percussive approach driven by a strong right hand, and a melodic method that manage to duplicate fiddle music note for note through clever and coordinated left and right hand techniques.⁴⁰ Tommy produced a highly articulate, and expressive music that was strongly structured and lent itself to dancing, too.

³⁹ Many people close to Tommy – friends, relatives, musicians – had vague recollections of Tommy's plans and intentions regarding the Charlie Poole project, but few had specific memories of Tommy having moved any distance toward accomplishing that goal. No further correspondence, notes, or draft pieces of dialogue, stage action, or narrative appear in Tommy's personal papers in the Wilson Library's holdings. There are no personal papers or correspondence in his daughter's files relevant to this project. Cece Conway retains no recollection of any such documentation regarding the Charlie Poole project in her personal papers. Author's notes, interview with Mike Craver, (conducted via telephone), 24 March 2017, 11:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.; Author's notes, interview with Cecelia Conway, Washington, D.C., 20 June 2016, 12:45 – 4:00 P.M.

⁴⁰ 8 September 2016 (1:17 P.M.) email from Mike Craver to Lew Stern.

In his playwriting and in the music he wrote for theatrical performances – music that was intended to move stage performances along – he was able to amplify moods, underscore messages, and craft memorable dialogue as well as lyric and song. In “The Last Song of John Proffit,” as well as his unfinished work on Charlie Poole, Tommy seemed to have found a way to create with both words and music, locating a point at which he could mix the two, and move back and forth between words and music in a comfortable way. Lyrics sit astride these two forms, writing and making music, and playwriting calls on the both capabilities along with a sense of the stage, a theatrical capacity. Tommy seemed to find a way to be creative in all these realms. If he did not exactly put his finger on what it took to unite these realms, he at least found a point where they intersected, so they each spoke to one another, echoed mutual strong points, and pushed the message forward.