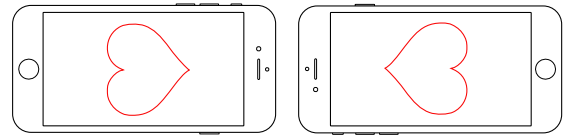


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## FCJ-183 iHootenanny: A Folk Archeology of Social Media

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### Abstract:

This paper excavates two models of communication that can be found littered across the intertwining histories of folk revivalism and digital culture in the United States. First I examine the Hootenanny, initially a form of rent party made popular in New York City in the 1940s by the group the Almanac Singers, which constituted a complex site of convergence of a range interests, styles, media, and performance genres. Second, I explore how the utopian vision of a community joined in song has been taken up recently by ‘social music’ iPhone apps made by the developer Smule. I will ultimately consider how the mediation idealised by the Almanacs has trickled down to a narcissistic will-to-be-‘in touch’ in mainstream digital culture, making the Hootenanny a virtual path untaken in the history of mobile communication.

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## Introduction

It has been tempting, for fans of folk music, to celebrate the creative possibilities afforded by Web 2.0 as a sign of the resurgence of something like a folk revival. [1] David Dunaway

(2010), for instance, has divided the history of folk revivalism in the United States into three periods. His first wave lumps together a wide range of collectors, researchers, and activists, from ethnographers to the more overtly political and propagandising efforts of Alan Lomax and others in the thirties and forties. Next is the 'folk boom', which featured the mass-commercial success in the fifties of the Weavers and then the Kingston Trio (Dunaway, 2010). Happily, the folk revival has returned again, according to Dunaway, beginning in the late eighties and early nineties, and the World Wide Web has been a key source of the new varieties of folk expression recently on offer: 'They are pulling out songbooks or warped records from their parents' folk revival, learning to play an instrument or two, and then performing for their Myspace friends or the virtual audience' (2010: 4). Dunaway (2010: 4) cites a *Rolling Stone* article from 2007 that dubs this the 'YouTube Folk Revival', which is defined by a reliance on networked personal computers. With guitar and social media in hand, anyone (at least anyone with a webcam, computer, and internet connection) can interpret any song they like and contribute to an ongoing and apparently organic process (Dunaway, 2010).

One could consider the developer Smule's popular line of iPhone apps as part of this neo-folk media constellation. Their products – including *Ocarina*, *Ocarina 2*, *Magic Piano*,\* *IAMTPAIN*, and *Sing!*\* – allow users to transform their sleek gadgets into expressive and simple instruments, often foregrounding the voice of the user as a key component of recombinant musical texts. Smule apps seem to answer Woody Guthrie's call to his fellow citizens that they must, and inevitably will, soon remember how to sing; they seem to allow us to join together in song as they foster digitalised reincarnations of our most 'organic' and 'timeless' instruments of all, our voices.

This paper will excavate two models of communication that can be found littered across the long, intertwining histories of folk revivalism and digital culture in the United States. [2] First we will examine the Hootenanny, initially a form of rent party made popular in New York City in the 1940s by the group the Almanac Singers. We will see that the Hootenanny (and the ideals that were attached to the concert format) constituted a complex site of *convergence* of a range interests, styles, media, and performance genres. However, for the Almanacs there were explicitly political aspirations at stake as well; the Hootenanny constituted a networked body through which 'bourgeois' distinctions, it was believed, could be challenged. Second, I will explore how the utopian vision of a community joined in song has also been taken up recently by *Ocarina*, *Sing!*, and other Smule iPhone apps. Drawing on the critical literature on 'prosumption' as a novel form of exploitation, however, as well as Jodi Dean's (2009; 2010) work on politics in an age of 'communicative capitalism', I will ultimately consider how the techno-authentic mediation idealised by the Almanacs has trickled down to a narcissistic will-to-be-'in touch' in mainstream digital culture.

Some readers might find it strange to see the labels ‘folk’ and ‘folk music’ appear in an article about iPhone apps. Some might be tempted to reach back for Richard Dorson’s (1976) concept of ‘fakelore’ – a pejorative he wielded at popularising folklore projects, such as the work of Benjamin A. Botkin – and which implied a distinction between authentic cultural growths and fake constructions (see Bendix, 1997). However, following the groundbreaking scholarship of Regina Bendix (1997), whose genealogy of the discipline of American folklore is informed by Michel Foucault’s archeologies of knowledge, the current paper assumes that categories such as ‘the authentic’ and ‘the folk’ are not real objects out in the world, but sites of struggle where competing interests and dispositions clash and compete. ‘The folk’ is a construction set into motion in part by Johann Gottfried von Herder and the Grimm brothers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see also Storey, 2003), but which has permutated and reverberated into contemporary popular music (Frith, 1981) and digital culture too (e.g. Jenkins, 2006), seemingly eager to encompass novel practices and transformations.

In other words, this paper conceives of the folk and the authentic, not as pure states of being, but as machinic assemblages; particular configurations of ‘folksingers’ will be read here as ‘diagrammatic’ or ‘abstract’ machines, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described them: ‘The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality’ (1987: 142). Machines for Deleuze and Guattari include technical practices and devices but also anything that works—and the dynamic and adaptive abstract machine can be plucked from one structure and inserted into another (on this conception of machines, see also Guattari, 2011). The question for Deleuze and Guattari is not whether or not a given diagram is pure or authentic. The question rather is how well and in what ways a machine, like a Hootenanny or a Smule app, goes about functioning within a context. Thus this is media archeology (see Parikka, 2012), if by another name. What if we were to peel back the grey plastics and clear interfaces of our social media to find the folk, which was a machine all along?

## The Hootenanny

The word ‘Hootenanny’ came to Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie in the late thirties, when the two were touring the country together, playing union rallies and anywhere else they could earn a few coins (Seeger, 1972). The trip is often cited as an important educational experience for Seeger, who was the younger and more inexperienced of the two (e.g. Dunaway, 1981; Seeger, 1972). But there was another important discovery to be made on this tour: in Seattle they found themselves playing a monthly political fundraiser that their

hosts called the 'Hootenanny' (Cunningham and Friesen, 1999; Seeger, 1972). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Hootenanny's pre-revival meaning was 'thing-u-ma-jing' or 'gadget' – a playfully pragmatic catchall with technological connotations. Thus even in this early incarnation in Seattle, the word prefigures elements of digital networks. All sorts of practices and activities could be transmitted through an all-encompassing frame of celebration: food, music, camaraderie, causes, etc. The Hootenanny was a downhome channel of convergence.

The connection of 'Hootenanny' with folk and leftwing musical expression was somewhat accidental, as we can perhaps imagine Guthrie and Seeger finding any number of other semi-archaic terms to employ, such as 'pod', which shares a similar etymology. [3] But nonetheless the word would soon become attached to parties and concerts held at the 'Almanac House' in Greenwich Village, New York City. The residents there, which included Guthrie and Seeger, began to hold 'Hootenannies' on Sundays when they were short on rent, and the events soon became popular, festive events where many notable folksingers and performers might drop by on any given weekend, such as Alan Lomax, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Lead Belly (see Cunningham and Friesen, 1999; Dunaway, 2010). But the Almanac Singers who lived there were perhaps the mainstays; featuring a revolving membership that included Guthrie, Seeger, Sis Cunningham, Lee Hays, Gordon Friesen, and Millard Lampell, the Almanac Singers exemplified the turn to nativism in left-wing American cultural politics in the mid to late thirties (Denisoff, 1971; Reuss, 2000). As Robert Cantwell (1996: 140) describes their style: 'None was a trained singer. Accents, phrasing, vocal timbre, and range, all mixed, both among the singers and with each individually, with a disarmingly unprofessional heterogeneity that drew on a number of flatly incompatible traditions.' The Almanac Singers' Hootenannies were embodiments and extensions of this eclectic, heterogeneous performance ideal. Folksingers, comedians, activists, and storytellers were all welcome, and the audience too was expected to join in on the choruses or even take a turn leading the group.

We can take the Almanac-era utopian idea as a diagrammatic machine: knowledge and culture not as a point-to-multipoint transmission (which is the characteristic process of the mass-media industries, as the Almanacs themselves were well aware) but as a multipoint-to-multipoint interaction. For instance, in the liner notes to the Folkways record *Hootenanny at Carnegie Hall, Sing Out!* editor Irwin Silber (1960: 2–4) lists essential features of the performance form: '(1) Audience participation; (2) Topicality; (3) Variety; (4) New performers; (5) The audience.' Silber's descriptive topography of the Hootenanny posits a diverse, collaborative, self-replicating structure ('authentic' but also sensitive to new historical events and new generations, as is evinced by 'topicality' and 'variety'). The Hootenanny was a distributed network that involved the dynamic circulation of knowledge and affect across audience members, performers, and songs. The Almanacs have been critiqued for effectively 'preaching to the choir' (e.g. Denisoff, 1971; Roy, 2010), but in theory

anyone could plug into the circuit. Indeed, as is the case with more recent digital networks, the more connections the better.

## Voices as Machines: iHootenanny Technology

Popular music scholars have pointed to the valuation of 'live' performance by the mid-century revivalists (e.g. Frith, 1981; Keightley, 2001). However, the Almanac Singers, as well as the topical songwriting movement more broadly, considered singing to be a hybrid media form. [4] The 'Almanac' in the group's name refers to the only book, aside from the Bible, that rural Southern families were said to have kept in the house (Wilkinson, 2009). The group was a living text, then, a 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) of collective, singing struggle with the printed word. As well, Phil Ochs's (1964) formulation 'all the news that's fit to sing' – which sums up the broader topical songwriting movement of the sixties, inspired by the Almanacs – figures oral expression through the parameters of print and writing. Topical songwriters were aiming their voices (qua newsprint, qua radio broadcasts) at the noises emanating from states and corporations. In this light, the voice is not a pre-modern relic of nature, but a wired, greased, loaded gun. As Woody Guthrie (1990: 83) put it, 'a song will shoot straighter than a long bore 32–20, and do more damage than the biggest cannon.'

A closer consideration of Guthrie, co-founder of and frequent participant in the Almanacs' Hootenannies, can further extend our image of the early Hootenanny participants' complex understandings of media. Although the photographs we have of him portray a wandering field worker, and though he tended towards Luddite sentiments in some of his early writings, Guthrie also occasionally explored the remediation of folk instruments within distinctly modern media ecologies. In keeping with the progressive spirit of the times, he famously labeled his acoustic guitar a fascist-killing *machine*. But the voice and the body also occasionally seem to be components within a larger system. For instance, in his 'Car Song' Guthrie (1999) revels in the experience of speed that derives from plugging into an automobile, his voice even playfully mimicking a motor in the chorus: 'Take me ridin' in the car, car ... Vroom vroom vroom vroom vroom vroom.' The 'natural', 'organic' voice of Guthrie seems to rev and idle, in between the verses, evoking the larger American desire for gasoline-fuelled adventures and experiences. [5]

Although Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land' probably still connotes images of rural pastures of plenty, the song is also full of machines and speed. The voice of the song does refer to his feet, as if he is walking across the United States of his own volition. But Guthrie also

gestures towards ‘that ribbon of highway’, which was relatively new at the time; as Robert Cantwell (1996: 137–138) sensitively describes it, ‘the “ribbon of highway” and “endless skyway” owe much to Firestone Tires, Pan American Airways, and *Life* magazine, during a period when America’s celebration of itself could include, without contradiction, its technological and commercial monuments.’ We must also wonder if the voice ‘sounding’ all around him is a face-to-face Hootenanny or rather the radio broadcasts bouncing their way across the nation. Guthrie’s friend Alan Lomax hosted his own programs on a handful of networks beginning in the late thirties, and Guthrie too performed on dozens of radio programs in the thirties and forties, both with the Almanacs and as a solo performer, including on Norman Corwin’s famous *We the People* (Cray, 2011). ‘A voice was sounding’ perhaps refers to both the live and the mediated. Or, perhaps here the distinction does not matter.

Guthrie vividly represents the machinic character of group singing in his pseudo-autobiographical novel *Bound for Glory* (1968), which he largely typed out at the Almanac House, during the period that the Hootenannies were first held in New York (Cunningham and Friesen, 1999). The novel is a *Kunstlerroman* of sorts about a folksinger who makes his way out of the Oklahoma dustbowl during the Depression, on the way discovering the power of song in social struggle. ‘Good’ communality is not simply distinguished from ‘bad’ structures of commerce or individuality, however, for Guthrie portrays a complex social and cultural battlefield. Across the opening pages, for instance, we see a violent and chaotic form of collectivity. Bodies and the train cars that carry them seem to mingle together, and yet the wanderers and ramblers have not yet found a connection:

*We looked like a gang of lost corpses heading back to the boneyard. Hot in the September heat, tired, mean and mad, cussing and sweating, raving and preaching. Part of us waved our hands in the cloud of dust and hollered out to the whole crowd. (1968:9)*

Guthrie vividly portrays a latent mass not yet sensitive to its collective potency and without a common language or channel. Hands wave into the dust and voices ‘holler’, useless, into the crowd; seeds scatter but none seem to find their way to fertile ground. In a striking passage later in the book, we are offered a performance of collectivity and connectivity that sharply contrasts with this earlier representation of pre-political virtuality, and it is the establishment of a common channel and code that is the transformational catalyst. A group of anti-racists confronts thugs and tormenters by standing and singing together:

*So as the last car of the train went on down the middle of the street, every-*

*body was singing like church bells ringing up and down the grand canyon of the old Skid Row: Just like A treeeee Standing by The waterrr We Shall not Be Moooooved! The whole bunch of thugs made a big run at us sailing cuss words of a million filthy, low-down, ratty kind. Gritting their teeth and biting their cigar butts and frothing at the mouth. Everybody on our side kept singing. They made a dive to bust into our line. Everyone stood there singing as loud and as clear and as rough-sounding as a war factory hammering. (1968: 356)*

Thus the machine that kills fascists is much more than the exterior ‘axe’ that is the acoustic guitar. Voices and bodies can meld and conjoin, too, forming a throbbing and propulsive ‘war machine’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), a steely rhizome of sonic solidarity.

The performance of Guthrie’s ‘This Land is Your Land’ carries a similar affective weight. ‘All around me a voice is sounding’, when sung by a mass of people, is a ‘performative statement’ (Austin, 1962) – one hears and sings, and thereby propels into being, a collective voice. [6] Building on the work of Rick Altman (1992), sound scholar James Lastra (2000) has suggested that there is no such thing as an ‘original’ sound, because sounds always also include the material in which they resonate (e.g. a room, an open space), and materials are always experienced differently depending on one’s point of view. In other words, because we are all stuck in our own, individualised cages of audition, there can be no ‘original’ sound to speak of but only an endless variety of interpretations, of which sound *recordings* too can only ever be an interpretation or reading (Lastra, 2000). But Guthrie imagines a different kind of singing and hearing, whereby it is possible, if even for a moment, for everyone to hear and sing more or less the same thing. Sounds are indexical imprints, in Guthrie’s utopian model of sending and receiving; they are circuits that can wrap together ‘a gang of lost corpses’ into a collective agent. It is the diagrammatic machine called the Hootenanny that makes real this ‘impossible’ way of hearing and singing. ‘All around me, a voice was sounding.’

The Hootenanny was not just a machine of pure and undivided union, however, for the form constitutes a utopian voice marked by both solidarity and multiplicity. Obviously the harmony of group singing was a key feature of political folk performance (Roy, 2010), but variety and even conflict also marked the Hootenanny as practiced by the Almanacs and as taken up by *Broadside* and *Sing Out!* Both folksong magazines positioned themselves as purveyors of the tradition begun by the Almanacs, but both often emphasised their commitment to the publication of writers and singers whose views conflicted with those of their editorial boards. As issue no. 2 of *Broadside* declaimed: ‘Our policy is to let each songwriter speak freely – even though we may not freely agree with the sentiments expressed – and let each song cut its own trail’ (*Broadside*, 1962: 7). Thus the Hootenanny

form, which was indeed translatable from performance to print, involved both solidarity and multiplicity. Indeed, you might have to sing along to something you do not like. To do so, for the folkies, seemed important in and of itself.

## Smule Apps

We turn now to some of the revival's unlikely heirs. Jeff Smith and Dr. Ge Wang founded the mobile apps developer Smule in 2008. Their objectives hearken back to the participatory and DIY ethos of the long American folk revival, which, starting with the small Hootenannies at the Almanac House's basement, tried to encourage the whole world to sing. According to the company's homepage:

*Smule's mission is to connect the world through music. With the premise that everyone is creative, Smule uses the magic of technology to liberate the expressive musician in everyone. Smule's award-winning applications include Magic Piano™, I Am T-Pain™, and Ocarina. (Smule, 2012a)*

Anyone can sing or play music. At least, we should all try. Indeed, with Smule software and iPhone in hand, many have done just that, for as of January 2013 Smule claimed to have 15 million active users (Caplan, 2013). The revival's mimeographed publications like *Sing Out!* and *Broadside* tried to make folk knowledge accessible (the magazines offered sparse chord charts for the most recent batch of topical songs, and often published the compositions of amateurs and unknowns), but Smule goes one step further by eliminating technique insofar as it is possible to do so without compromising the feelings of expressivity and virtuosity that can come from playing music. As Anthony Ha (2012) has described Wang's vision: 'When someone opens a Smule app, he says they shouldn't ask themselves, "Am I a musician?" because the answer is usually no. Instead, the goal is to draw people in, then by the time they realise they're making music, "it's too late – they're already having fun."'

Indeed, their programs are responsive and intuitive. The *Ocarina* and *Ocarina 2* apps turn your phone into something akin to a medieval pipe. The user blows into the microphone, directing the pitch by pressing various combinations of fingerings on a four-button touchpad. *Magic Piano* works similarly but with obvious differences in sound samples and interface. The user touches falling notes on the screen (a cascading visual which matches the song's rhythm, not unlike musical games such as *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band*) to recreate



the central melodies of well-known hits. And *Sing!* harnesses the voice, allowing you to sing along to contemporary chart-toppers, pop and rock classics, and even public domain 'folk' songs. Traditional numbers like 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' are free, but you need to pay to participate in the folk process of material such as Justin Bieber's 'Girlfriend'.

The clear expressivity of Smule apps hearkens back to certain aspects of the folk revival, but so too does the machine-like quality of some of the programs. *IAMTPAIN*,\* *Songify*, and *Autorap*\* all deploy the encoding device 'Autotune', which has increasingly been used since the late nineties to foreground the digital ground of contemporary popular music. [7] Users can record observational monologue or improvisational singing (you could even recite Guthrie lyrics), and *IAMTPAIN*, *Songify*, or *Autorap* will carve up and manipulate the recorded speech or song into rhythmically and harmonically pleasing (and often humorous) music, foregrounding the computational motor of the process. A new app called *Mad Pad* even blends this recombinant mashup aesthetic with the art of field recording as pioneered by Alan Lomax: 'Remix your life with MadPad! Turn everyday sights and sounds like your car, an empty soda can, or your friends into the ultimate percussive instrument. Who would have thought everyday life could be so musical?' (Smule, 2012b). Field recordings become samples to be remixed at the discretion of the folklorist-cum-deejay. Guthrie sang like a car, echoing the delirious proclamations of Tomas Marinetti and other Futurists but from within a Marxist framework, and Smule's folk revival also allows us both to sing into, and as, the machine.

In addition to sound and feel, though, a key connection between the Hootenannies and Smule apps are the latter's various sharing functions. *Ocarina* allows you to drop in on anyone on the planet currently logged in and jamming in real time. You are given a visualisation of their current location, and also the opportunity to 'love' their performance, which is as easy as clicking on a heart-shaped icon. The accumulated total of 'love' is then tabulated and displayed. On the theme of 'social' music, Wang boasts of the revolutionary potentialities of his instrument:

*We use location to geo-tag people who have recently played the Ocarina; we can actually send that anonymously to the Smule cloud, as it were, and it's the first instrument that we know of in history that allows its players to hear one another from around the world. ... We believe this is just the beginning of a new revolution, where people will relate to one another differently and people will express themselves differently, all facilitated by what we can do on this device. (in Kirn, 2009)*

And more recent Smule apps do not just allow you to toot your own horn or merely admire the tooting of others; you can now play with other anonymous folk through collaborative cloud networks. *Sing Karaoke*, for instance, allows multiple vocalists each to contribute a line or even just a phrase to their favourite tune, and the collaborative product can then be enjoyed and shared by all. On Smule's Facebook page, where an enthusiastic virtual community gathers to like and respond to recent promotions and contests, users have shared and commented on *Sing!* recordings featuring up to twenty collaborators. Each individual contribution recorded on the way to work, perhaps, in bedrooms, at recess: 'All around me, [voices] sounding.'

As we have begun to see, there are obvious echoes of the Hootenanny in the music-making mobile software of Smule. But Pete Seeger's (1972: 149) observation, 'our planet is full of singing people', was for Seeger an implicitly political remark. To reclaim individual and collective voices would be to reject the 'phoniness' churned out by the military-industrial-entertainment complex. Smule apps might seem to rekindle the promise of the original Hootenannies, at which distinctions between observer and participant were cast off, but we will now consider a few different ways in which Smule apps are an effect rather than a revolutionary cause – an articulation of a relatively new form of work, and of the degradation of political culture, in the era of 'cognitive' capitalism.

## Composition or Repetition?

In his book *Noise*, political economist Jacques Attali (1985) explores the overdetermined relationship between our historical understandings of music and noise, on one hand, and social and economic change and revolution, on the other. Music for Attali is not just a reflection of particular socio-economic forces, though it is in some senses that as well; music – and more importantly, what a musical culture excludes as *noise*\* – *also signals towards new social potentialities*. The emergent bourgeois notion of the hermetically sealed work helped to prepare the ground from which the ancient regime would eventually be toppled (Attali, 1985). And the 'stockpiling' of labour time in the twentieth century, which is how Attali figures sound recording, pushed capital towards new horizons of surveillance and commodification (Attali, 1985). The concluding and ambiguously utopian chapter explores what Attali terms the age of 'composition', which he describes as:

*Doing solely for the sake of doing, without trying artificially to recreate the old codes in order to reinsert communication into them. Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language. Playing for one's own pleasure, which alone can create the conditions for new communication.*  
(1985: 134)

We might be reminded of Smule apps and the ‘YouTube folk revival’ in general when we read Attali’s utopian prognosis. Although self-branding and promotional culture pervade social networking sites and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Academia.edu (see Hearn, 2008), many of Smule’s virtual communities seem to be forums of anonymous folk creation. Faceless flutists and singers going by the names of prem, fatsausage, pimpflute, Link, (anonymous), montreal, Marco, Emelie, PBMike15, sword, Thanatos, unicorngiggle, RIPLeRoiMoore, and PressTheHeart are just a few of the nodes that cut across this rhizome. They do not seem to be playing for recognition, but because they enjoy being creative for its own sake, or ‘doing for the sake of doing.’

But the hardware underneath the magical music-making *Ocarina* and its phylum-mates is always ready for more than ‘composition’: iPhones are only ever a swipe or a click away from becoming once again the tethering gateways to a 24/7 ‘immaterial’ (Lazzarato, 1996) workplace, as some neo-Marxist scholars have described it. [8] As the modern disciplinary boundaries between factory and home, public and private erode, exploitation reaches beyond the assembly line to subsume virtually all corners of social life (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996). Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2009) has aptly described this confluence of exploitation and creativity with his term ‘cognitariat’, and mobile communications are important vectors across which cognitariat subjects generate and share the affects and knowledges captured by cognitive capitalism:

*Labor is the cellular activity where the network activates an endless recombination. Cellular phones are the instruments making this recombination possible. Every info-worker has the capacity to elaborate a specific semiotic segment that must meet and match innumerable other semiotic fragments in order to compose the frame of a combinatory entity that is info-commodity, Semio-capital. (Berardi, 2009: 89)*

From this angle, Smule apps appear as merely the folksy mask of the larger mobile interface keeping us in constant contact to the endless streams of data many are required to sort through in order to be valuable contributors on the informational labour market. Guthrie’s machine killed fascists, and Seeger’s surrounded hate and forced it to surrender. Now the mobile, individualised pods carrying *Ocarina* and *Sing!* circulate value-generating affects, symbols, codes, and communication.

These instruments are not only happy distractions to keep flexible immaterial labourers amused in between calls or jobs. Like many applications and platforms that make up Web 2.0, Smule apps can also be considered as sites of value extraction. As Christian Fuchs

(2010: 48) puts it, '[c]apitalist produsage is an extreme form of exploitation of labour that the producers perform completely for free', and the uncountable hours anonymous users have spent building and sustaining Smule's network would be an example of the 'producer' exploitation Fuchs describes. [9] As the Smule privacy agreement makes plain:

*Smule shares demographic, profile and other general information about you and our other customers with our partners on an aggregate basis. This means that we tell our advertisers general information about the characteristics of our customer base. ... Smule may share your unique device ID with advertisers or your location (based on opt-in location-based services, which rely upon a device's GPS coordinates). (Smule, 2012c)*

Smule apps are part of the broader cultural industry of social networking, where creativity, communication, and collaboration are all surveyed and mined for aggregate data. The song collectors John and Alan Lomax shared in Leadbelly's copyrights, and took two thirds of his haul at concerts (Filene, 2000; Miller, 2010). Thus Smule participates in a long tradition of American song collectors' exploitation of the folk.

## The Politics of the Chorus

We could say that the Almanacs' Hootenannies actually anticipated the contemporary 'prosumer': the audience was expected both to pay and to sing along, to plug into a participatory network and derive pleasure both from the network itself and from their own contribution. And, again, both the Hootenanny and the iPod share similar etymologies. But clearer differences emerge when we go back to the idea of singing as a diagrammatic machine, for the Hootenanny and Smule apps constitute materialisations of very different utopian visions.

In *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Jodi Dean (2009: 2) describes 'communicative capitalism' as 'the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism'. Of particular interest is Dean's (2009) discussion of technological fetishism and the transition of communication from the sending of messages (with destinations) to the endless circulation of 'contributions'. Political action is as easy as pointing and clicking, liking and sharing, but these activities are harnessed by capital and in turn reconsolidate the grip of neoliberal policies, according to Dean. As

Geert Lovink (2011: 7) more simply puts it in his similarly sobering account of social media: 'When everyone broadcasts, no one is listening.'

Eavesdropping on a live jam by an *Ocarina* user nicely highlights some of the claims Dean makes. We are confronted with a clean, pixelated image of planet Earth. Glowing in the background are all the other active users, tiny dots scattered across the planet; we audition one performer at a time, whose live musical expressions are visualised as waving streams (think *Ghostbusters*) shot straight out through the atmosphere and into space. Yet, the colourful stream of 'social' music emitted by each *Ocarina* player is not intended for the other nodes in this strangely solipsistic network, it seems, or even for the eavesdropper. (*Ocarina 2* has removed the other nodes from view entirely.) Its target is the process of contributing as such, and in the visual representation of this folk machine we see the peculiar synthesis that is networked communication and narcissistic individualism. 'All around me, voices sounding / Away from each other / *Directly up into outer space!*' *Ocarina* players are hyper-connected to an online community boasting 15 million users: a virtual Hootenanny to end all Hootenannies. But it is not possible for their broadcasts to take root, which is the ideal end of the folk process, according to Seeger and Guthrie. It is not possible for their broadcasts to be translated into other forms of embodied solidarity, which the program itself fascinatingly narrates. *Ocarina* players' contributions are by and for the medium – folksongs by and for spectacle.

## Conclusion

This essay has explored the echoes of one particular performance model, the Hootenanny, in contemporary digital culture. The dream of a non-hierarchical space in which each voice maintains its individual integrity but is simultaneously able to meld as one with the whole remains a potent one in the twenty-first century. And yet, we can see its articulation take on varying forms, with varying kinds of baggage. Apple iPhones, and Smule apps in particular, borrow many of the aesthetic features of the Hootenanny. Pete Seeger's (1972: 149) claim that 'our planet is full of singing people' is perhaps the central theme of these devices. The question of solidarity, however, is cast aside in this most recent round of DIY revivalism, and these instruments even seem to make passivity and narcissism a part of their very design and aesthetic.

But this paper could have ended differently. The People's Microphone phenomenon, for instance, a focal point of the Occupy Movement, offers perhaps another example of the Hootenanny's continued relevance. Pete Seeger even stopped by Zuccotti Park to take

a turn. After he prodded the People's Mic to collectively hush itself, he fed into it 'The River That Runs Both Ways', an environmentalist song but also perhaps a metaphor for participatory media. Running both ways like Seeger's river, singers and speakers plugged their voices together in Zuccoti Park and around the world, melding distinctions between self and other at the same time that they lent their selves to the hybrid transmission of dissent (King, 2012; Ruby 2012), which has a destination.

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## Biographical Note

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## Notes

[1] Fans of digital media have done just as much to perpetuate such claims. The influential media scholar Henry Jenkins exemplifies this discourse when he writes: 'To create is much more fun and meaningful if you can share what you can create with others and the web, built for collaboration within the scientific community, provides an infrastructure for sharing things average Americans are making in their rec rooms. Once you have a reliable system of distribution, folk culture production begins to flourish again overnight' (2006: 136). Following the zeitgeist, folklorists have become interested in digital media as folk channels as well. *Journal of American Folklore* has recently begun to publish work on video games and net culture as objects of folklore: Kiri Miller (2008) has explored the folkloristic

qualities of the game *Grand Theft Auto*, and Robert Glenn Howard (2008) has pondered the vernacular aspects of digital networks, taking blogging as a case study.

[2] Although they do not spend time on the folk revival, Fred Turner (2006) and Thomas Streeter (2011) have probed deep connections between digital culture and both countercultural and Romantic utopianisms – and thus the histories they chart overlap with parts of the territory I am working.

[3] According to Apple folklore, the ‘pod’ in ‘iPod’ was inspired by Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (which in its time also expressed an anti-IBM theme). But one of pod’s archaic meanings is ‘the socket of a brace into which the end of a bit is inserted’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Fascinatingly, Gordon Friesen’s recollection of the original usage of ‘Hootenanny’ points in a similar direction: ‘Hootenanny had been in use in rural America from way back to designate something you didn’t know the exact name of. Say, for example, a couple of farm boys in Oklahoma might be overhauling a “T-bone Ford” out behind the barn with pieces spread all around, and in fitting them back together one might say to the other, “that thing-a-ma-jig goes here and that hootenanny goes there”’ (Cunningham and Friesen, 1999: 211).

[4] Ronald Cohen’s (2002) comprehensive and excellent history of the American folk revival highlights the importance of mass-media gatekeepers in this cultural field, though media-theoretical questions are not pursued. See also Svec (2013) for a reading of influential American folklorist Alan Lomax and his mediated conceptions of ‘the folk’, a case study that illuminates the folk revival’s sensitivity to media as such.

[5] Although he does not discuss ‘Car Song’, Cantwell (1996: 144) identifies the importance of the car in the Almanac Singers’ work and image: ‘The most important instrument in this effort was the automobile—the Almanacs travelled in a ‘31 Buick—and after it the portable recording machine.’

[6] I am indebted here to Hoday King’s (2012) article on the People’s Microphone of Occupy, which he interprets using Austin.

[7] The technology behind Autotune has a fascinating source in the military-industrial complex, in particular in the oil industry, as Dave Tompkins’s (2010) history of the vocoder

has recently highlighted. Jonathan Sterne (2013) has also recently presented work on this strange history.

[8] Vince Manzerolle (2013) has also recently explored the complex dynamics of mobile 'smart' phones in the post-Fordist workplace.

[9] Fuchs is pointing to the term 'prosumer', which was coined by the futurist Alvin Toffler (1981).

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