

2008

# The Box, the Glittering Strings, and the Unbearable Hillbillyness of Being: Warren's The Cave, Country Music, and Vanderbilt Fugitive-Agrarianism

H.R. Stoneback

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stoneback, H.R. (2008) "The Box, the Glittering Strings, and the Unbearable Hillbillyness of Being: Warren's The Cave, Country Music, and Vanderbilt Fugitive-Agrarianism," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol8/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Penn Warren Studies by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

*The Box, the Glittering Strings, and the Unbearable  
Hillbillyness of Being: Warren's The Cave, Country  
Music, and Vanderbilt Fugitive-Agrarianism*

H. R. STONEBACK

I

For shame of his own hillbillyness? No—for shame of  
something else, something more deeply himself?

Robert Penn Warren, *The Cave*

When I was a graduate student at Vanderbilt University in the 1960s, I was also a country singer and songwriter. I lived with one foot in the elite, somewhat closed-off literary world of Vanderbilt and another foot in the honky-tonk clubs and the sometimes seedy offices of music publishers and recording studios where you had to go if you wanted to sell your songs. Some version of dissociated sensibility was inherent in that situation and it was underlined by geography, since Music Row was a stone's throw or two across the street from Vanderbilt. But there was no communion, little communication between the two distinct places, *terroirs*. My first narrow box of an apartment in Nashville was next door to what had been the offices of the legendary poetry journal *The Fugitive* in the early 1920s. When I lived there, five song publishing companies were in the same block. Yet at Vanderbilt, country or hillbilly music was rarely mentioned, even though most of it emanated from the immediate neighborhood. At Vanderbilt, it was something called *traditional balladry* or *true folksong* that was highly respected, and taught in courses in the English Department curriculum.

Indeed, even if country music was the object of much condescension in some Vanderbilt circles, something called *folksong* was very highly regarded as a foundation of the Southern Renaissance. In one ballad and folksong course, I often sat there bemused (and sometimes outraged) as the instructor went on and on

about the corruption of oral tradition and the death of folksong, about the importance of the storytelling legacy of the ballad tradition, and all the rest about how this tradition had all but disappeared—and this in a classroom that was roughly a football field away from the vital heart of country music, where ballad and storytelling traditions were very much alive. While some of the best story-songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were being written and recorded within a few blocks of that classroom, we were being drilled on the weary old late-Victorian folksong ideas of Francis B. Gummere, who insisted that folksong had *communal* origins, that folksongs were created through the improvisations of a singing, dancing throng. In 1960s Nashville, we found this notion amusing and the word *throng* rather silly—we even tried some communal compositions—catastrophes that we filed under the heading *folkthongs*. One of my songwriting colleagues from Alabama referred to the ballad theories of Professor Gummere (at Haverford) and his contemporary, Professor George Lyman Kittredge (at Harvard)—the duo who dominated academic ballad studies for a long while after the death of Francis Child—as the “insidious moonshine produced by tone-deaf Yankee pedantry.” We who were songwriters, we who were making the new songs, the best young songwriters (some of them, and their songs, later famous) and *making new* (in the best mode of literary modernism) the old folksong subjects, styles, and tunes—we laughed inwardly at the notion of a *throng* creating a song; bored, some of us wrote our own country ballads in that classroom while that professor droned away about hopelessly abstract, politicized, and, ultimately, condescending notions of communal origins, patronizing some imaginary primitive group designated “the folk.” But there was no room for our notions, our practice of the country craft of ballad-making in that Vanderbilt ballad class.

As far as we could tell, this instructor had never been in a Nashville country music joint, wouldn’t be caught dead in The Idle Hour or the Tally-Ho Tavern, and wouldn’t comprehend that what went on in such places (where we tried out our new songs) had everything to do with authentic folksong; and he probably avoided that back side of the Vanderbilt campus when he drove in from Belle Meade. And of course I could not tell him that after his

class, I would be going directly to Music Row to peddle my songs, or that two nights a week I was singing country music just across 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue South from the Vanderbilt English Department. When I turned in a term paper with the title “The Image of the Lonesome Whistle in Country Music,” he seemed to shudder visibly, one of my observant classmates said, shrinking back, reluctant to touch a paper with a reference to country music in the title. Later, after he saw that there was ample historical and folk background material leading up to my discussion of Hank Williams and Johnny Cash, he praised part of the paper, but suggested I change the title to “The Lonesome Whistle in *Folksong*” and cut the parts about Hank and Johnny before sending it out to some journal. I did not do so. In fact, I burned the paper in the fireplace in a log cabin where a handful of us sat around picking and singing country songs, no doubt feeling that we were the true living carriers of the folk tradition that some at Vanderbilt thought was dead. A little later, when it became known in the English Department that I was singing in country music joints, a fact I had tried to conceal for more than a year, I was told by several persons that this would probably ruin my chances of getting a Vanderbilt PhD in English.

But that’s only one side of the story. There were a few Vanderbilt professors who actually came to some of the country music places to hear “Stoney and Sparrow” (as my act was known then, and now), and once they did, they immediately talked us into doing a country/gospel concert on the Vanderbilt campus—in the Divinity School of all places. And they insisted we pick guitar and sing at English Department parties. There were *some* professors, then—most notable among them my beloved mentor, T. D. Young—who loved Jimmy Rodgers, Hank Williams, Roy Acuff, and authentic country music. Dan Young, English Department Chair, leading Southern Literature scholar, and renowned raconteur, would turn a kitchen chair around, sit on it backwards the way Jimmy Rodgers was known to do, and regale us with vivid childhood memories of the times he saw Jimmy Rodgers in concert. (Thus, clearly, it was no accident that T. D.’s son Kyle would later become the Director of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.) So even if there was at Vanderbilt, on the one hand, condescension toward country music

from those who existed musically in a kind of walled-off world of traditional balladry, and on the other hand, a certain enthusiasm for the genuine folk authenticity of living country music songwriters and performers, the dominant view failed to recognize that some of the fondest notions of that sealed-off world of “true” folksong, balladry, and oral tradition were in fact convincingly demonstrated to be still very much alive in the country music business that had its national and international center just behind the Vanderbilt campus.

It was from within these contexts that I undertook my first writing about my primary subject here, Robert Penn Warren’s novel *The Cave*—which has a good claim to some such title as “the ultimate country music novel.” I had divined from what I knew about Donald Davidson’s interest in folk and country music, and George Pullen Jackson’s work with what he called “white spirituals,” that there had long been a Vanderbilt version of a traditionalist/authenticity impasse when it came to folk and country music. I had grown weary—because nobody seemed to grasp the point—with my own reiterated view that *The Fugitive* magazine and the evolution of Nashville Agrarianism were exactly coincident and contiguous, geographically and historically, with the Grand Ole Opry and the evolution of hillbilly and country music. There was an important book waiting to be written on the subject, but I didn’t want to write it, and I was told it would not be approved as a dissertation topic. Besides, while I loved writing about literature, I never wanted to write *about* songs, I just wanted to write songs, and *sing* them. Maybe someone would get the point someday, I thought then, and see the connections between that benchmark southern poetry journal *The Fugitive*, founded in 1922 with its platform statement (written by John Crowe Ransom)—“*The Fugitive* flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South”<sup>1</sup>—and The Grand Ole Opry, founded shortly after, and fleeing from the same moonlight-and-magnolias version of the Old South. And both institutions, firmly rooted in a sense of tradition, sought a renewal of poetic and musical diction, idiom, style, and sensibility.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 42.

As Country—then called Hillbilly—Music evolved in the 1920s, so too did the *Fugitive* poets, eventually becoming better known nationally, by the end of the decade, as the Vanderbilt or Nashville Agrarians, or just The Agrarians. Their key volume, *I'll Take My Stand*, appeared in 1931 and received national attention. A manifesto in defense of the agrarian values of the South, the book asserted that agrarian values “were the best hope not only for the South in resisting the effects of northern industrialism but also for the rest of America as well.”<sup>2</sup> The images and themes of the Vanderbilt Agrarians—evoking love of the land, sense of place, sense of the past, sense of family, sense of community, and a fundamentally religious sensibility rooted in an inburnt knowledge of good and evil, love and betrayal—were shared by the other Nashville Agrarians: the singers, writers, producers, and fans of Country Music. If these concerns of the Vanderbilt Agrarians became the foundational values of that great awakening in literature known as the Southern Renaissance, the same touchstones provided the heart and soul of Country Music, which also shared with Country Lit, at times, the same prophetic, redemptional, and salvific mode of *I'll-take-my-standism*.

## II

### “JACK HARRICK HIS BOX”

#### *The Cave*

In any case, I felt in the 1960s that Warren had written *The Cave*, his guitar-and-hillbilly-and-song-centered novel, with the Vanderbilt impasse and intricacies regarding folk and country music somewhere in the back of his mind. I did not argue this in the Warren chapter of my dissertation. I simply stated that the novel was a “systematic and thorough” examination of hillfolk traditions,

---

<sup>2</sup> Blotner, 105.

that the identity quest of Jack Harrick, Warren's "hero of all the hillbillies," and his sons Jasper and Monty, should lead us to esteem *The Cave* as a "complex and successful exploration of . . . the hill man as mythic hero: simultaneously, [Warren] effects the deflation and the aggrandizement of the traditional [hillbilly] image, while he explores its very nature as image."<sup>3</sup> I would change little now except my prose, although the force of my old argument depends on my dissertation's preceding 400 pages of argument about the Hillbilly Myth in American and World Literature. (Should you chance to read my dissertation, remember that I originally had in my title the words "The Hillbilly Tradition," but somehow I was talked into that oh-so-Vanderbiltese revision—The *Hillfolk* Tradition.)

Now, forty years later, I revisit the question of the guitar, the songs, and hillbillyness in *The Cave*. It is hardly hidden from even the most casual reader of the novel that Jack Harrick's guitar is the core image and central symbol, the gathering point where most of the novel's meanings converge and from which resolutions resonate. On the first page as on the last page of the book, the guitar holds center stage. In the opening scene in the sun-shafted wood-glade, the "weight of the guitar" propped against the empty boot defines the scene and announces the design of everything that is to come. In the closing scene, Jack Harrick's epiphanic transactions with his old guitar lead to the novel's final vision and last words: "It's Monty's box." In that opening scene, one strong ray of sun enters the beech glade, "finds the guitar," Warren writes, "strikes the strings to a glitter, and you think that that glitter might almost be sound, so startling it is." Playing the glitter-light-sound image for all it's worth, Warren drives it through three more paragraphs, following the "ray of sunlight [that] strikes the glitter off the guitar strings" and makes "you hear it like a big *whang*" until the lightray moves beyond the strings and illuminates the inlaid mother-of-pearl legend: "JACK HARRICK HIS BOX 1901."<sup>4</sup> Then Warren, in a typically concise and summary adumbration that announces the novel's deep

---

<sup>3</sup> H. R. Stoneback, "The Hillfolk Tradition and Images of the Hillfolk in American Fiction Since 1926," (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1970), 400-14.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *The Cave* (New York: Signet/New American Library, 1960), 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

structure, writes: “Jack Harrick, whoever he is, is not here in the beautiful glade . . . For Jack Harrick, a big, grizzled, heavy-headed old man, ruined and beautiful, is two and one-half miles away, sitting in a wheel chair, dying of cancer” (9).

Jack’s box as the core image has not received adequate critical attention. When the guitar itself has been closely inspected, the wrong conclusions have been drawn. Barnett Guttenberg, for example, whose reading of the novel is otherwise very much on target, sees the guitar, with what he calls “its arrogant inscription,” as “a symbol of [Jack’s] sensual sovereignty.”<sup>5</sup> Only someone who has never really played a guitar, never lived a lifetime writing identity on the glittering strings of light-made-sound, could consider the bardic personalization of a guitar an “arrogant inscription.” And while it is sometimes true that a guitar, an axe, a box, may be an instrument of “sensual sovereignty,” it is probably more often an instrument of the resolution of tension between creative liberation and entrapment, simultaneously present as the light is released from the glittering strings as sound. Warren carries the opening guitar-scene through two more pages, culminating with his compelling image of the blue jay perching on the neck of the guitar. As the jay bird “flings up from the neck of the guitar . . . a thin sweet note vibrates spookily from the one string that the jay bird’s heel has plucked” (10). Images of the guitar reverberate through the rest of the novel. Jack’s box provides the master-key for much of the novel’s box imagery—the cave itself, Preacher Sumpter’s box of a room, Isaac Sumpter’s attic box room where he sweats and reads Keats, all about that other bard-bird, and little Ikey’s “Pride-of-Jerusalem sex-box” Goldie (113). Warren’s guitar has received passing critical attention as a general cave-analogue and—as Guttenberg puts it—“a very specific analogue, through its most vulgar connotations, of the cave-womb[;] it suggests on the one hand the coffin-void, the escapist’s womb, and on the other hand, the fruitful womb.”<sup>6</sup> But the actual guitar has not been played accurately and well by Warren critics to date. I’ll come back to that in a moment.

---

<sup>5</sup> Barnett Guttenberg, *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Guttenberg, *Web of Being*, 102.

First, I want to consider the songs—since nobody else seems to have paid much attention to them. Song passages and allusions in *The Cave* fall into three categories: 1) songs that are named and referred to, though not rendered, as part of the singing action in a novel which has a great deal of song in it; 2) songs that are actually rendered in the singing of them, with stanzas and passages liberally sprinkled throughout the text; 3) songs that are part of the allusive subtext, sounded at varying depths of what Hemingway critics would call the iceberg; or as Warren put it when discussing Hemingway, the “snuck-in thing.”<sup>7</sup> In general, Warren’s deployment of song and musical allusions strikes me as one of the novel’s strongest points, reflecting stylistic choices and narrative strategies that Warren probably learned from one of his most important yet least recognized influences, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, whose masterwork, *The Time of Man*, deploys song as structure with as much skill and subtlety as any novelist—ever.

In the first category of named songs, there are four hymns: “Bringing in the Sheaves,” sung by the choir at Jack Harrick’s Elk Creek baptism (134)—a contextually apt and well-known hymn (“Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we shall come rejoicing”). And then there is “Throw Out the Life-Line,” one of the hymns sung by the caveside crowd (304)—“Throw out the Life-Line! Throw out the Life-Line ... Someone is sinking today”—another song appropriate to the situation. This is followed by the singing of “Almost Persuaded” (305), surely the sexiest of revival and altar-call hymns—“Almost persuaded come, come today; Almost persuaded turn not away; Jesus invites you here, Angels are lingering near Prayers rise from heart so dear, O wanderer, come.” This hymn is strategically placed to lead into the scene where the slick-faced boy makes Jo-Lea feel her panties, the trophy he’s been carrying around with him. The hymn is perfectly suggestive of the orgiastic atmosphere in certain quarters of the caveside terrain. But by far the most skillful use of a hymn—both named and rendered in the singing action—is “Rock of Ages.” It is perfectly apt for Jasper’s situation, especially the words that the

---

<sup>7</sup> Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers, *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews 1950-1978* (New York: Random House, 1980), 43.

crowd sings: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee” (252). The hymn then becomes the text for the meditation of Nick Pappy, who can’t figure out “what the other words meant, about the water and the blood stuff,” who wonders: “Who wanted to hide in a rock?” Then he gets upset for Mrs. Harrick, thinks it “not nice and considerate” to sing “That song to remind her of being stuck in a rock” (252-253). At the same time, it *is* Jasper’s cleft rock, where he *does* want to hide. By the way, Rosanna Warren tells me that “Rock of Ages” is one of only three songs she ever heard her father sing.<sup>8</sup>

That covers the named hymns. There are other allusions to songs that may be detected, especially if we grant Warren the depth and subtlety of Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory, whereby what we know—in this case about music—is the measure of how far we may sound the iceberg depths of the text. For example, when Brother Sumpter repeatedly chants “My son, my son!... Would God I had died for thee” (81), some readers will think of the appropriate Old Testament passages, while others who know the Sacred Harp tradition of hymnody will hear one of the most powerful of all Sacred Harp hymns: “Would God I had died, would God I had died for thee Absalom my son, my son.” And Warren would certainly know this, since Sacred Harp had been one of the most cherished folk traditions in some Vanderbilt circles since Fugitive-Agrarian days; and although dying out across much of the South, it was still very much alive—that is, in its authentic country church setting, not merely in its urbanized concert-hall avatar—in Middle Tennessee into the 1960s.

Two direct allusions to Hank Williams songs occur. Jebb Holloway is left alone in the cave when Isaac crawls away, and he feels “so lonesome he thought he would cry” (247). This echo of one of Hank Williams’ most famous songs, “I’m So Lonesome I

---

<sup>8</sup> Rosanna Warren to H. R. Stoneback, 25 March 2007. Her complete statement on her father and music is well worth recording: “My father was really NOT musical at all. The only three songs I ever heard him sing were the Wreck of the Old 97, Casey Jones, and Rock of Ages. He loved Leadbelly, and I remember him playing us records of Leadbelly. Other than that, he didn’t put records on at all—that was my mother’s department (Bach, Pergolesi, Handel, which he endured). I am sure he absorbed a lot of the country songs from BEING in the country in his youth, and in his later excursions—it was his way, to absorb—Good luck with your hillbilly paper—great title!”

Could Cry,” is more than a passing reference, too, since this entire scene, with its light and death imagery, its cave-crawling and time-stopped language, seems to be constructed from Williams’ light- and death- pervaded song, with its insistence on how time *crawls* by. Later, when Isaac is preparing to flee to New York, his father tells him how he had crawled in the cave and actually found Jasper dead. In a passage filled with light imagery, Brother Sumpter’s first words are: “I—I saw the light” (336). “I Saw the Light” is, of course, Hank Williams’ most famous country gospel song, and its words are inscribed on his Montgomery graveshrine visited by millions of pilgrims. Warren would certainly have known Williams—a Nashville icon and an international legend in the decade before *The Cave*—and his songs.

There are other song allusions, more general yet more important structurally. For example, if in some sense the entire novel is essentially the Ballad of Jack Harrick, the legend who hammers away and makes his anvil ring out over the hills, how can we fail to see in the story of Jack, really *John* Harrick, JH, Warren’s salute to that other mythical JH—John Henry, that legendary figure of ballad whose story and attributes echo throughout *The Cave*: “You could hear his hammer ring”; “a man ain’t nothing but a ... man , Lawd Lawd”; “he died with his hammer in his hand.” And “John Henry” is sometimes said to be the very first “hillbilly” recording, from 1924 when the term “hillbilly” was first used regarding music. Finally, at the very base of the novel’s country song and hillbilly iceberg, we must note “The Death of Floyd Collins,” recorded in 1925, one of the all-time best-selling country or “hillbilly” 78 recordings. I have been unable to find evidence that Warren owned the recording—he certainly knew the Floyd Collins story and referred to it in *The Cave* and elsewhere—but he must have known the song, too. Everybody did in the 1920s. Vernon Dalhart, who had the biggest hit version of the oft-recorded song, might be considered a proto-hillbilly, trapped in that identity even though his pre-hillbilly career included operatic recordings and he lived in Westchester County (New York) when he recorded his most famous hillbilly records. The famous ballad, “The Death of Floyd Collins,” is surely the ur-text of *The Cave*—but that’s another essay. And one more thing about Dalhart:

in the mid-'20s he also had a huge hit recording of "The Wreck of the Old 97." Rosanna Warren remembers her Pa holding her in his arms, when she was four or five, dancing around, making an awful hillbilly racket singing "The Wreck of the Old 97." That would be 1958, when he started working on the novel. Also, we should note that Leadbelly, the legendary country/folk singer (he was *not*, as he is sometimes called, a *blues* singer) was Warren's favorite country singer, and Leadbelly records are the only records that Rosanna remembers her father playing, ever.<sup>9</sup> Maybe Leadbelly is a submerged presence in the "iceberg" depths of *The Cave*, since he recorded "John Henry" many times, as well as "Rock of Ages" and other hymns and country gospel tunes.

*The Cave*, then, is a folk ballad, a hillbilly song, far more so than it is a Plato-derived allegory or anything else. And at the heart of it are the songs of Jack and Jasper and Monty Harrick. A lengthy investigation, more monograph than essay, might delineate the novel's patterns which suggest a movement from the early traditional songs of Jack Harrick, the box-beating hoedown ax-man of "Turkey in the Straw," to the soulful, lonesome country songs of Jasper who "must of made up a thousand" songs, as Monty says (29). Even though we don't hear much of Jasper's songs—maybe nobody else can really sing them—he certainly shares some of the characteristics of that more famous lonesome drifter, Hank Williams. Finally, in the family tradition, we have the songs of Monty, tentative at first, perhaps (to use his phrase) from "shame of his own hillbilliness" (33), but finally powerful and authoritative, holding center stage, as his ballad, his song-story, performs its functions of community and communion at the caveside. Monty, in effect, reclaims the power of traditional country song, and old Jack acknowledges this when he sings Monty's song at the end and wills his old box to his son.

Monty's ballad for his brother Jasper occupies a good deal of space in Warren's text; it is sung repeatedly, and it undergoes a certain evolution that Warren may have intended to illustrate the folk process of ballad creation. Here is one verse of Monty's early version, sung by him, playing his father's guitar, singing for his brother Jasper, trapped in his death-cave underground:

---

<sup>9</sup> Rosanna Warren (see n. 8).

Oh he's lying under the land,  
 With nobody to take his hand.  
 He is lying in the ground,  
 And he cannot hear a sound.  
 Oh, bring him out and let him in the sunshine stand!  
 (204-205)

The song echoes throughout the novel and then, in the closing pages, Jack Harrick sings it. Old Jack Harrick, the “hillbilly heller” dying in his wheelchair, plays his guitar for the first time in a long time, and sings, transforming Monty’s song into his own epiphany. Jack’s version—or variant—illustrates stanzaic and line-placement variation, the omissions and accretions characteristic of oral tradition and folksong, as well as the reshaping of each stanza’s final line to fit the singer’s needs and vision. Just before he sings these verses, Jack Harrick thinks: “*Every man’s got to make his own kind, his own kind of song*” (379).

He is lying in the ground,  
 And he cannot hear a sound.  
 He is lying under the land.  
 There’s nobody to take his hand.  
 He is lying where he may no more be found.

He is lying under the land,  
 But I know he’ll understand.  
 He is lying under the stone,  
 But he will not lie alone—  
 I’m coming, son, I’m coming, take your Pappy’s hand. (380)

Hasty examination of these verses, or an attempt to find a tune to set them to, might lead some readers to jump to the conclusion that Warren is not a very good ballad-maker, i.e., ballads to be *sung*. This conclusion would be wrong, I think. Clearly, Warren worked hard to get this ballad right. In an early manuscript version of Jack’s closing song, there is this less effective stanza:

My son's lying in the ground  
 In that cave there's not a sound  
 He is lying under the land  
 With nobody to take him home  
 There's nobody there to take his hand and hear his sigh.<sup>10</sup>

It could be argued that the first two lines are better than the later versions, but the last two lines are simply awful and nearly unsingable. At this point in the evolution of the ballad, Warren has not yet established the *aabba* rhyme-scheme; clearly, through several manuscript versions and numerous cross-outs, Warren works to make a credibly *folk* ballad with a regular rhyme-scheme. He varies syllable count per line and he seems to understand that syllable count varies widely in folksong and, as the singer-songwriter knows, depends entirely upon the performer's phrasing and the tune that carries the words. Once a certain tune is chosen, precise syllabic destiny is more or less dictated. It could be argued that Monty's first two lines (eight syllables each) demonstrate more effective song-making than Jack's version, since it may be preferable, from the perspective of melopoeia and singing, to establish the form before variation is employed (i.e., the seven syllables of lines three and four). But that's a tricky argument and Jack's syllabification may represent the more sophisticated phrasing and timing of the veteran, idiosyncratic performer. Again, everything depends upon the tune.

It is impossible to know what tune, if any, was in Warren's head as he composed these stanzas. When I sang this song at the 2007 Robert Penn Warren Conference, I gave it a fancy name—"Red Warren's Cavesong: Or, the Lonesome Death of Jasper Harrick"—and a fancy tune, ending line four of each stanza with a modal effect (with a minor chord) to embody a certain cave-resonance. I tried to get that audience of Warren scholars to sing along from the handout provided. That's a recording that will not be released; and it does not seem likely that "Red Warren's Cavesong" will make its way into oral tradition and become a folksong. But we should not leap to the conclusion, based on biographical reports of Warren's

---

<sup>10</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *The Cave Manuscripts*, Robert Penn Warren Papers YCAL MSS 51, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Box 134: Folders 2414-15.

tin ear, that Monty's song is bad ballad-making, bad songwriting. The very point of Jack's tentative first verse, which, it could be argued, is inferior to Monty's and less singable, may be Warren's deliberate *literary* effect, to show Jack's at first tentative but then authoritative reshaping and possession of the song as his own, his epiphany. Even if he could not *sing* ballads, Warren knew how they were *made*, and how they *worked*—see his benchmark discussion (with Cleanth Brooks) of balladry in *Understanding Poetry*.

Jack Harrick's song and box was his joy, his strength and vital being, until he was trapped inside his box, his own song. Ask somebody who played the guitar all his life, ever since he could hold one, what it was like to be called "hillbilly" because you picked guitar and sang Hank Williams. And then by the mid-fifties, when you played guitar and sang, the girls screamed and everybody called you Elvis. Different songs, same box, same trap now called *rockabilly*. Go ahead, ask me about Jack Harrick's dilemma. Ask somebody who made a living in the late '50s when Warren was writing *The Cave*, and into the '60s and after, singing in country music joints and what they called Folk Clubs and Coffeehouses, singing real folk and urban folk-protest and country folk, and how it wasn't "Elvis" any more, how they called you "folkie" or Dylan, and the fakefolk girls instead of screaming blew potsmoke in your ear and put you in some phony-intellectual box. And whatever you sang, the club regulars who came to hear you, the groupies, wanted something you couldn't give them, and as all entertainers will at times, you despised them for their weakness. Different songs, same box, same trap. Go ahead, ask Jack Harrick, ask me. Ask me what it is like to have a very popular song written about you so that after you're on stage around the country people swarm you for autographs, and you inscribe your name on concert programs, on clothing, on body parts, on virgin guitars that cost ten times what you ever paid for any of your boxes. Even the Governor of Texas comes backstage, kisses you, and then she says: "Oh Stoney, you're my favorite song." And because they all know a Jerry Jeff Walker song, "Stoney," whose title is your name (one of your names) and tells a kind of truth about one old road-moment of your life they think they *know* you, *own* you; ask how it feels to drive down the

road and hear that hit song about you on the radio and say “Is that me? Who is Stoney?” And it’s the same for Jack Harrick. “Who was Jack Harrick?” he asks himself, then answers: “a dream dreamed up from the weakness of people . . . he hated them . . . for all their praise and envy . . . for their weakness, which had made him what he was.” But then he sees that “out of his own weakness, he had dreamed the dream of Jack Harrick” (367-68). The people need a mythic singer, but that singer must ultimately accept that blessed identity with humility and live his life *outside* the myth, the song. Jack is finally freed from the weakness of living within the myth, from the unbearable hillbillyness of being, and the *weight* of his guitar that we read about on the first page of the novel is reclaimed, reinvested, renewed beyond all lightness of being when he reconciles his identity and knows he is earth-anchored in place, in family, in love, when he passes on his song and sings Monty’s song, when he gives Monty his box.

Both James Justus and Leonard Casper have had perceptive things to say about the importance of touch, the touch of human communion, in *The Cave*. Casper sees that Jack Harrick at the end is “prepared for death; and ready for life,” that when he “strikes his clanging anvil chord” on his guitar, he is careful not to damage “His Box,” which is now Monty’s box. Yet Casper radically misreads, mishears, the heart of Warren’s novel, Warren’s ballad, when he concludes: “[Jack] strikes his chord. Anyman’s moving hand on the moving strings becomes the image of sound becoming light; image of the bardic writer’s art.”<sup>11</sup> But this is, as Ezra Pound would have it, mere logopoeia, the dance of intellect among words, lacking the melopoeia of words charged with music, the phanopoeia of accurate images cast upon the visual landscape of the imagination. No, it is *not* “Anyman’s” or Everyman’s moving hand that strikes the chord; it is the hand of the chosen, the bard mysteriously gifted and appointed to each community, who must learn not to be trapped by his chosenness. And the guitar strings are *not* “the image of sound becoming light” but rather, as Warren’s imagery so clearly reveals, the image of *light* becoming *sound*. The country singer and

---

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Casper, *The Blood-Marriage of Earth and Sky: Robert Penn Warren’s Later Novels* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 31.

the singer of country touches the light of the motionless glittering strings, that touch turns light into sound, into song, into story that binds community in the chanted litany of communion—and that is the image of the bardic maker's art, the singer's song.