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THE JOURNAL OF ASTROSOCIOLOGY

Volume 2 (2017)

Table of Contents

Introduction to Volume 2	<u>1</u>
Message from Dr. Jim Pass	<u>5</u>
<i><u>ARTICLES</u></i>	
Ashley Chandler Karp & Alan Steinberg , <i>Exploring the Inspirational Effect of a National Space Program: The Effect of Nationality on Feelings Towards the Ability to Get to Mars</i>	<u>8</u>
Nathanael McIntyre , <i>Criteria for Sustainability in the Orbital Environment</i>	<u>20</u>
Gordon M. Gartrelle , <i>Digging Up the Cosmos: Is Asteroid Mining Economically Feasible?</i>	<u>70</u>
P.A. Hancock , <i>On Bored to Mars</i>	<u>103</u>
P.J. Blount & Jake Fussell , <i>The Space Age Narrative as Reflected in Southern Music</i>	<u>121</u>
Andrew Fergus Wilson , <i>Postcards from the Cosmos: Cosmic Space in Alternative Religion and Conspiracy Theories</i>	<u>133</u>
<i><u>BOOK REVIEW</u></i>	
Kathleen D. Toerpe , <i>Review of Palgrave Handbook of Society, Culture and Outer Space</i>	<u>150</u>
<i><u>JOURNAL INFORMATION</u></i>	
About the Astrosociology Research Institute	<u>i</u>
Instructions for Authors	<u>iii</u>
Suggested Topics	<u>vii</u>
Publication and License Agreement	<u>xv</u>
Call for Articles: Volume 3	<u>xvii</u>

The Space Age Narrative as Reflected in Southern Music

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ABSTRACT - This article briefly explores the notion of the Space Age as a historical and cultural construct in the Southeastern United States through an analysis of Southern music across a range of time periods and genres. It argues that the Southern culture reflects a complex understanding of the space age as a technological and political phenomenon with both global and local impacts.

I. Introduction

The Space Age as a construct presents an interesting network of technical, political, and cultural markers that help to define the shift in perception that humankind underwent as it began to perceive itself in the context of space travel. The ability to look back at the Earth and visualize the planet as a global space represented a dramatic shift in the cultural and political imagination of peoples worldwide. At the same time though, the world was being constructed around divisions between two dominant super powers with fault-lines running along oppositional political ideologies. This created a number of narratives within dominant culture that framed the space age and the Space Race in terms of the wonder of scientific achievement coupled with the existential threat of the others technology. Space was more than just a novelty; it transformed the public's imagination of what was possible, but did so in terms on international competition.

These narratives were in turn shaped by a new ability to conceptualize “humankind” as a definite group, a group in which there was no “other.”¹ Space exploration initially developed within an emerging international governance system that evolved in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. This new system gave the individual human being a status in global society for the first time through the concept of human rights. The U.N. Charter² and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³ were both formative texts that reshaped international governance along the lines

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¹ This theme can readily be seen in the emergence of law governing outer space, which sought to govern space activities for the “common interest of mankind.” U.N. General Assembly Res. 1348 (XIII). *Question on the peaceful uses of outer space* (Dec. 13, 1958), http://www.unoosa.org/pdf/gares/ARES_13_1348E.pdf.

² See U.N. Charter, Art. 1(2).

³ U.N. General Assembly Res. 217 A(III). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Dec. 10, 1948).

of improving conditions for humankind as a whole. The Space Age helped to entrench this restructuring by literally imaging the world as global space and allowing for shifting conceptualizations of both geography and humankind.⁴ Of course, inequality was not immediately or completely obliterated, but these frameworks gave minority populations footholds from which to assert their rights by framing their complaints within dominant narratives.

The American South was no different. Marked by both racial and economic inequalities, the minority groups were struggling to obtain social and political rights within the context of the American Constitution. This claim was given footing by the emerging notion of “humankind” at the international level. This meant that these groups both co-opted dominant narratives to link their claims to reflect dominant cultures and produced counter-narratives that critiqued the structure of the system. This article will illustrate this co-option and production in the context of southern music traditions, and argue that this helps to create a rich place for space within the folk life of the southern United States. Further, by focusing on localized reactions to global processes, this article will seek to show how technological advances helped to embed international politics and international processes into local narratives.

This first section of this article will address why this research focuses on the American South as a context for understanding how space narratives were produced in local cultures. Second, this article will address briefly the effect of the Space Age on the broader political and cultural imagination and explore the construction of the Space Age in terms of politics and society. The third section will trace space narratives found within the southern musical traditions. Finally, this article will conclude with reflections on what these narratives mean in terms of both constructing southern culture and in terms of technological change, and it will argue that the existence of such themes challenges romantic notions of the “primitivity” of southern music.

II. Southern Space

The American South at first glance may seem like an unlikely focal point for an investigation of space themes on local culture. Predominantly rural and poor, the American South seems to be a poor setting for examining Space Age narratives. However, the South presents a unique place in which to observe these narratives.

First, the American South presents a unique setting in which American music developed. Traditions such as bluegrass,⁵ blues,⁶ and jazz⁷ all emerged from different locals in the South. These traditions in turn were highly influential in shaping modern rock, country, and R&B genres.⁸ The area has been a focal point for researchers and is considered central to American roots music.

⁴ The first image of Earth from space was captured by a camera on a V-2 missile in 1946. Jason Major, “This Is the Very First Photo of Earth from Space,” *Universe Today*, October 24, 2014, <http://www.universetoday.com/115641/this-is-the-very-first-photo-of-earth-from-space/>.

⁵ See generally Cecelia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press 1994).

⁶ See generally Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New Press 2002).

⁷ See generally Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton 1977).

⁸ So, for instance Guralnick traces such influences on the rock music of Elvis Presley. See generally, Peter Guralnick, *The Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (London: Abacus 1999).

As a result of this rich tradition, the music of the South gives a unique glimpse at the folk life and processes of the region.

Second, space loomed large in the region. The south is home to several NASA centers: Johnson Space Center in Texas, Michoud Assembly Facility in Louisiana; Stennis Space Center in Mississippi; Marshall Spaceflight Center in Alabama; Kennedy Spaceflight Center in Florida; Langley Research Center in Virginia; and Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia.⁹ In addition to these several private spaceports are located or currently being planned in the region.¹⁰ Indeed the South's extensive coastline and low population density makes it an excellent choice for safely engaging in highly risky space activities. The South became a setting for space activities as the United States and, as such, a site for the development of technologies central in geopolitical tensions of the time.

Finally, the south was central in American political processes during the height of the space race. Powerful southern senators such as Lyndon B. Johnson and John C. Stennis helped to shape American space exploration (as can be seen by the NASA centers bearing their names. The South was also a central point for the Civil Rights Movement, which means that the space race with its global overtures was framed in terms of local inequalities within the space of the South. Galloway notes that Sen. Johnson, the chief architect of the 1958 National Aeronautics and Space Act, was at the same time working on a number of rights issues.¹¹ The juxtaposition of high technology against rural poverty is complex. It both opened doors for integration¹² and displayed the vast inequalities that remained in the region.¹³ This means that the narratives revealed through the musical tapestry of the South reflect distinct awareness of the complex political arrangements being shaped by and shaped around the Space Race.

III. Constructing the Space Age

This section will discuss how the Space Age was constructed as a broad cultural narrative with specific emphasis on the American context. It will argue that while the space age furthered political claims of a universalistic view of "humankind" as a social group, the American construction adopts classic philosophical fault-lines that reflect a world deeply divided. These fault-lines are then mirrored in in the construction of the Space Age in the American South.

⁹ NASA, "NASA Centers and Facilities," <https://www.nasa.gov/about/sites/index.html> (accessed June 12, 2015)

¹⁰ These include the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport in Virginia (<http://www.marsspaceport.com/>); Midland Air and Space Port in Texas (<http://www.flymaf.com/35/Spaceport>); Oklahoma Spaceport (<http://airspaceportok.com/>); Cecil Field in Florida (<http://www.flyjacksonville.com/content.aspx?id=406>); Alabama Spaceport (see Jason Koebler, "Alabama Wants to Build a Spaceport," *Motherboard* (June 3, 2015) <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/alabama-wants-to-build-a-spaceport>); and Camden County in Georgia (see "Camden County Spaceport," *The Georgia Space Society* (Feb. 4, 2014) <http://spacegeorgia.org/2014/02/04/camden-county-spaceport-update/>).

¹¹ John M. Logsdon, ed., *Legislative Origins of the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958: Proceedings of an Oral History Workshop: Conducted April 3, 1992* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998) at 57-58.

¹² Steve Inskeep, "How NASA's Space Race Helped to Integrate the South," *NPR* (May 6, 2015), <http://www.npr.org/2015/05/06/404626521/we-could-not-fail-the-first-african-americans-in-the-space-program>.

¹³ For example, Nelson poses the question of how an industrialized society that can place humans on the moon cannot address the problem of urban ghettos. See Richard N. Nelson, *The Moon and the Ghetto: An Essay in Public Policy Analysis* (Norton 1977) and Richard N. Nelson, "The Moon and the Ghetto Revisited," *Science and Public Policy*, v. 38/2 (2011) 681-690.

The project of developing a concept of “humankind” has been an ongoing one in political philosophy with deep roots in Kantian literature.¹⁴ After the horrors of the Holocaust, the international community reorganized itself and began an ongoing process of incorporating the individual as a legal subject that received some basic set of rights based solely on the fact that that individual was human.¹⁵ The 1945 UN Charter clearly notes that “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”¹⁶ This was followed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.¹⁷ Both of these documents express the notion of a universal human group that had core rights enforceable against the state.

The legal imagination for conceptualizing humankind was reinforced by a growing cultural notion of a global social group. Outrage over the Holocaust had allowed for the idea governments were limited in the exercise of their power within their territorialized borders. This was complimented by rapidly expanding communications and transportation systems, which allowed cosmopolitan ideologies to thrive. The Space Age contributed to this notion as well. *Sputnik I* did more than simply ignite a technological battle between the United States and the USSR, it changed the social imagination overnight. It opened up the world simply by overflying other countries¹⁸ and it “shocked the American political system into action.”¹⁹ For the first time, an individual was able to envision the world as a global space in a quite literal sense. The first photo of Earth from an orbiting satellite was taken by *Explorer VI* in 1959²⁰ and the famous Blue Marble shot, which was the first photo of the full Earth from space, was taken in 1972.²¹ Coupled with this visual consciousness, it was the use of space for transnational communications allowed for easy contact with individuals in other countries.²² In short, the technology of the Space Age, rescaled and respatialized the common geography of the Earth.

While the space age was helping to create constructs for re-conceptualizing the other, it was doing so in a world that was divided by the Cold War. This, of course, is critical to understanding how space age narratives are built. Because the Cold War cleaved along ideological lines, the other is politically constructed. Both the US and the USSR made claims to be the best political

¹⁴ See generally, Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) available at: www.constitution.org/kant/perpeace.htm.

¹⁵ Interestingly, theories on how one treats the otherworldly nonhuman were developing at the same time. This line of thinking was pioneered by Andrew G. Haley, see generally, Andrew G. Haley, "Space Law and Metalaw-Jurisdiction Defined." *J. Air L. & Com.* 24 (1957): 286.

¹⁶ U.N. Charter, Art. 1(3) (1945).

¹⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, U.N.G.A. Res. 217 A (III) (Dec. 10, 1948).

¹⁸ Walter McDougall, *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 141-156.

¹⁹ John M. Logsdon, ed., *Legislative Origins of the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958: Proceedings of an Oral History Workshop: Conducted April 3, 1992* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998) at vii.

²⁰ NASA, “First Picture from Explorer VI Satellite,” NASA Image 59-EX-16A-VI (Aug. 14, 1959) available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nasacommons>.

²¹ NASA, “History of the Blue Marble,” available at: http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/BlueMarble/BlueMarble_history.php.

²² Arthur C. Clarke had predicted this early on in his “Extra-Terrestrial Relays: Can Rocket Stations Give World-wide Radio Coverage?” *Wireless World*, October 1945, 305-308, available at: http://lakdiva.org/clarke/1945ww/1945ww_oct_305-308.html. The first direct relay telecommunications satellite was *Telstar I* and was launched on July 10, 1962. McDougall, *supra* note 7, 358.

system for providing basic human rights, and as a result, the Space Race was built on the competition of two opposed political systems attempting to achieve the project of building humankind through opposing mechanisms. Otherness becomes a political problem as opposed to a problem of immutable qualities. This led to intensive competition in technological fields, which meant that the social imagination embedded concepts of technological prowess into nationalistic sentiments. Technology in this sense is the result of the political process. The social imagination was able to encompass both the universality of humanness as well as construct an “other” that needed liberation yet was also to be viewed with skepticism. This is reflected in the duality of the national pride felt by the United States with the Moon landing as a triumph over the Soviet Union, and the rhetoric deployed with the landing that emphasized that the landing was done on behalf of “all mankind.”²³

Such constructions were mirrored within southern socio-cultural relations as well. The south was plagued by poverty, which was aggravated by the increasing automation of the agricultural industry, and racial inequality became a centerpiece of the South’s political landscape due to an increasingly vocal civil rights movement. At the same time that these issues were emerging, the South became a stronghold of critical infrastructure for the space program. The South boasts numerous NASA facilities, which placed ideas of space exploration and its accompanying technologies directly into the geographic, sociological, and cultural spheres of the South. This also brought the narratives of the Space Age into the socio-political contestations of southern society. For instance, the narratives of humankind at the international level helped to give credit to claims for social equality being made by African-Americans. It also made a stark example of economic inequality as impoverished southerners saw first-hand the extent of government spending during the Apollo missions.²⁴ At the same time though that it echoed inequalities, the Space Age was also contributing to the wonder space exploration as a narrative within southern culture that emphasizes technological and scientific inquiry.

IV. Space in Southern Music²⁵

In recent years music scholarship has increasingly shed light on the fact that traditional music in the U.S. South is something more than a quirky and ingenious holdover of the region’s rapidly disappearing agrarian identity. In the past three or so decades, a number of critics have brought to the table several key issues which work to deconstruct problematic notions of cultural authenticity and isolation, and encourage us to examine industry, multicultural interchange, the development and marketing of genres, and other forces of modern life as immovable realities in the formation and evolution of southern music. In his 2008 book *Linthead Stomp*, historian Patrick

²³ NASA, “Apollo 11 Plaque Left on the Moon,” available at: http://www.nasa.gov/centers/marshall/moonmars/apollo40/apollo11_plaque.html. The rhetoric is also found in Neil Armstrong’s words during the Moon landing of “one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” Ned Potter, “Neil Armstrong: How ‘One Small Step’ Became First Words on Moon,” ABCNews.com, Jan 2, 2013, <https://www.abcnews.go.com/Technology/neil-armstrong-small-step-words-moon-apollo-11/story?id=18115402>.

²⁴ Roger D. Launius, *NASA: A History of the U.S. Civil Space Program* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company) 185. See also, Guido van Rijn, *The Truman & Eisenhower Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs, 1945-1960* (London: Continuum, 2004) 102-128.

²⁵ In order to make this article more listenable, the citations go to You Tube videos of the songs being cited to. While these citations are functionally informal, the authors find them more useful than citations to obscure records. We also find it to be more fun.

Huber decries the common assumption that the earliest recorded country music was pure, untouched resounding from the Anglo-American peasantry of Appalachian mountain hollows.²⁶ Huber explains that although the northern based commercial record companies of the 1920s certainly advertised the fiddling and banjo picking artists on their rosters as “hillbilly” folksingers, many of these early country music pioneers – Charlie Poole, Fiddlin’ John Carson, Darby & Tarlton, The Dixon Brothers – were actually lowland southerners from sizeable, bustling textile mill cities of the piedmont regions of Georgia, Tennessee and the Carolinas.²⁷ In a related vein of study, music historian Elijah Wald works to demystify the exceedingly obscured and romanticized life and music of Mississippi blues musician Robert Johnson. Wald points out that although spellbinding and powerful, Johnson’s recorded repertoire of thirty-one songs reflects as much of popular trends and commercial influences as it does any singular preoccupation with crossroads mythology or retentions of West African folk custom in the hoodoo underworld.²⁸ This is to say that Robert Johnson’s creativity, as is the case with all outpouring of southern musical expression in the 20th century, cannot be wholly extrapolated or disentangled from contemporaneous narratives of American popular culture and transition.

How then, might southern musicians have asserted their feelings toward the colossal advances taking place on the international stage during the onset of space exploration? As in the case of many events and circumstances throughout American history, they turned no blind eye. Of course, “outer space” as a concept was no new topic to southern song. For generations balladeers and street criers had sung of man’s relation to the celestial bodies above. This tendency took a particularly romantic turn in the Victorian era when sentimental parlor songs became all the rage and much of this repertoire gained footing in the oral tradition. The growth of industrialization served as a source of widespread anxiety and wonderment. Novelty songs like “Come Take a Trip in My Airship,” (1904) a version of which was recorded in 1929 by the aforementioned North Carolina banjo player Charlie Poole, were immensely popular and spoke to growing public fascination with the miracle of human flight.²⁹ At the same time, various songs and ballads warned of the harmful and potentially catastrophic risks of technological advancement. Two of the most popular ballads in the American folk music canon, “John Henry” and “The Titanic,” make use of real life events to illustrate the downfall of excessive industrializing and its harms to humanity. In the case of “John Henry,” the African American railroad worker whose job is being replaced by the steam-powered drill, becomes a hero when he races the machine in a spike driving contest and somehow, miraculously, manages to beat it.³⁰ However, this heroic triumph comes at a great cost: John Henry loses his life and therefore becomes a symbol of the sacrifice of man’s sacrifice to progress. In “The Titanic,” the narrative takes a decidedly moralistic and prophetic tone as the excesses of man’s curiosity and material desires lead directly to his downfall. And again, the narrator refers to the assumed disposability of working class people, as in South Carolina songster

²⁶ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (U.N.C. Press 2008).

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (Amistad 2004).

²⁹ Charlie Poole, “Come Take a Trip in My Airship” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1hWLCMO7kw> (accessed June 12, 2015). [Video is no longer available].

³⁰ We now know that John Henry was a real person from Holly Springs MS and that this event really took place at the Big Oak Tunnel near Coosa, Alabama. See Garst, John. "Chasing John Henry in Alabama and Mississippi: A Personal Memoir of Work in Progress," *Tributaries: Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association* 5 (2002): 92-129. For more on the John Henry legend and the music surrounding it see “The Legend of John Henry,” http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/ (accessed June 12, 2015).

Pink Anderson's version, which makes the tragic yet brutally honest statement: "They put the poor below / They were the first that had to go. Wasn't it sad when that great ship went down?"³¹

It is no wonder that as the United States became engaged in World War II and the unfolding events of international conflict and turmoil quickly turned colossal in scope, southern musicians and singers would incorporate many of these events and topics into their songs, and this would result in a steady release of blues and folk material on the subjects of Roosevelt, Hitler, Mussolini, Pearl Harbor, and the atom bomb throughout the mid to late 1940s.³² The Buchanan Brothers, a gospel country duo from rural Dade County, Georgia, would record a single in 1946 called "Atomic Power," a song which applauds the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and points to the invention of the atom bomb as being "given by the mighty hand of God."³³ The recording earned the Buchanan Brothers a spot on that year's country top ten list, and on the heels of that success they released another single (RCA Victor, 1947) which too carried Biblical resonances, although with more lighthearted and whimsical content, "When You See Those Flying Saucers."³⁴ Both of these tracks highlight a skepticism of high technology rooted in religious beliefs, but they also illustrate an awareness of growing technological innovation.

In the 1950s, as the American public grew increasingly aware of and enamored with the palpability of the notion of space travel and exploration, scores of musicians from various regions of the country were also drawn to this alluring topic and released their own musical interpretations and reactions to the controversy. They ranged from whimsical instrumental numbers and novelty dance pieces to overtly political ballads to silly story songs about sexual encounters with Martian and everything in between. So, for example, Nat King Cole's version of "Destination Moon" which expresses a vision of the future in which space travel is routinized:

There once was a time when the colorful thing to do
Was to call for a date on a bicycle built for two
But cars and trains and even planes all have had their day
Now the time is due to call for you in the modern atomic way.³⁵

This musical phenomenon was given a name, with the Soviet Union's launching of the *Sputnik I* satellite, and this enormously significant event took place just as southern performers like Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, and Jerry Lee Lewis were shattering musical molds, transgressing social confines, and revolutionizing the American cultural landscape. In general, the majority of

³¹ For a collection of Titanic songs and lyrics see "Tragedies and Disasters," *The Folk Archive*, <http://www.folkarchive.de/tragic.html> (accessed June 12, 2015).

³² See generally, *Atomic Platters*, <http://www.atomicplatters.com/index.php> (accessed June 12, 2015)

³³ Buchanan Brothers, "Atomic Power," available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4aRgvXxp3I> (accessed June 12, 2015).

³⁴ Buchanan Brothers, "When You See those Flying Saucers," available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRcZjIvQM0> (accessed June 12, 2015).

³⁵ Nat King Cole, "Destination Moon," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7H5-oEP0iFk> (accessed June 12, 2015). The lyrics were written by New York born Roy Alfred, but Cole was from Montgomery, AL. "Destination Moon also plays on the theme of sexualized technology. Another notable version is by Tuscaloosa, AL's Dinah Shore. Dinah Shore, "Destination Moon," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pkiSPoZiIU>.

the rock n' rollers of the late 50s and early 60s incorporated *Sputnik* and other advances in outer space exploration as a new and exotic creative platform for the expression of familiar teenage themes: fear, frustration, excitement, speed, and sexual desires. Billy Lee Riley, the Arkansas rockabilly singer who's Sun Records hit "Red Hot" was a hit in 1957, recorded a lesser known number that same year which demonstrates some of this fascination: "Flying Saucer Rock n' Roll."³⁶ And likewise, Carl Mann, a rockabilly singer from Huntingdon, Tennessee, released this dance piece the following year, "Satellite No. 2," which notably emulates *Sputnik I*'s beep in the opening guitar riff.³⁷ Indeed, there are many more rockabilly songs about *Sputnik*, and it seems as if you were not really a rockabilly band unless you had a *Sputnik* or a "satellite" song of some kind in the late 50s / early 60s.³⁸

Blues musicians also took to writing about the subject, as can be heard here from Arkansas born blues piano player Roosevelt Sykes, who recorded this blues in 1958 for the Imperial label in New Orleans. "Sputnik Baby" demonstrates more of the sexual innuendo associated with rocket imagery in the era.³⁹ This is also rooted in the tradition of singing about automobiles as sexual power (for instance 'Terraplane Blues' by Robert Johnson⁴⁰). Additionally, Sykes mentions Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev by name in this song, which acknowledges the Cold War overtones of the new technology. Another example of *Sputnik* in the Blues is Harmonica George's 1959 "Sputnik Music."⁴¹ Though instrumental, the title of this track certainly indicates a distinct awareness of world events.

But not all of the songs about Sputnik were so lighthearted or playful. Some of them expressed serious concerns and fears toward the idea of the Soviet Union's actions, as you can hear

³⁶ Billy Lee Riley, "Red Hot" available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxt_7sD9znM (accessed June 12, 2015) and Billy Lee Riley, "Flying Saucer Rock 'n' Roll" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIIYMPeA0sg> (accessed June 12, 2015).

³⁷ Carl Mann, "Satellite No. 2" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XB9Vgbhu7Dw> (accessed June 12, 2015)

³⁸ Other examples include Jerry Engler, "Sputnik" available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxH_M-WJ9_0; Nelson Young, "Rock Old Sputnik" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZb1boVtKXc>; The Equadors, "Sputnik Dance," available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_fARQcrL6c; Al Barkle, "Sputnik II" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1K6zN5tdSO4>; Bill Thomas, "The Sputnik Story" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR2c24mxKsA>; Joe Tate, "Satellite Rock" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biH--wA-J0U>; The Rebelaires, "Satellite Rock" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lurYPIPMHew>; The Satellites, "Satellite Bop" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Va5bNAoTj1o>; Skip Stanley, "Satellite Baby" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lMjwirgxGc>; Warren Scott and the Memphis Playboys. "Rocketship Mama" available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXHu2EEO_Jw; Bill Fadden and the Silvertone Flyers, "Satellite Rock" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlqxUFMmJX4>; and Jimmy Copeland & the J-Teens, "Satellite Rock" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yhi7qmfW3Wg> (accessed June 15, 2015).

³⁹ Roosevelt Sykes, "Satellite Baby" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdFiB3y6bTA> (accessed June 15, 2015).

⁴⁰ Robert Johnson, "Terraplane Blues" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIoPrGI0EuY> (accessed June 15, 2015)

⁴¹ Harmonica George, "Sputnik Music" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDNaK0WeZRI> (accessed June 15, 2015).

here from Ray Anderson, a bluegrass singer from rural West Virginia, who recorded this song, “Sputniks and Mutniks,” in 1958:

Sputniks and mutniks flying through the air
They're so ironic
Are they atomic?
Those funny missiles have got me scared.⁴²

Some of the songs which expressed concern about space exploration were deeply rooted in religious skepticism. Dora Alexander was a gospel street singer in the French Quarter of New Orleans who folklorist Sam Charters recorded in 1958. Her song “Russia, Let God’s Moon Alone” conveys that the moon is God’s sacred territory and therefore no place for humans.⁴³ “The moon ain’t worryin’ you”, she sings. Again, this song illustrates an understanding of the global politics that were unfolding around the space age. Her religious skepticism is matched with a skepticism of the Soviet actions.

As the U.S. became further involved in the space race, southerners wrote songs which both critiqued and embraced the idea.⁴⁴ One example of a positive response is a song written by legendary Texas bluesman Lightnin’ Hopkins, “Happy Blues for John Glenn.”⁴⁵ Hopkins seems to have penned the song as a congratulatory statement for the astronaut who flew three times around the globe in 1962 becoming the first American to orbit the Earth. On the other hand, the song might include a little tongue-in-cheek humor, implying that money was Glenn’s major motive for his expedition: “That half a million dollars made him feel so well.” The rockabilly track “Shake it over Sputnik” by Billy Hogan is another example of this type of reaction.⁴⁶ The song is a celebration of Werner von Braun’s Huntsville, Alabama team (“a bunch of brains from across the pond”) that developed the *Juno I*, which launched *Explorer I* the United States’ first Satellite in 1958. Hogan declares this “Alabama’s contribution to the conquest of space.”

One of the most famous examples of a harsh musical critique of the space race was written by Gil Scott-Heron, the great Harlem jazz poet who had been raised in Jackson, Tennessee. “Whitey on the Moon” sets up a valid contradiction between the US government’s involvement in

⁴² Ray Anderson & the Home Folks, “Sputniks and Mutniks” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tTXu6hkCm0> (accessed June 15, 2015). Another interesting example of Anderson’s politicized country music can be found in “Stalin Kicked the Bucked” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9O7doMD89NI> (accessed June 15, 2014).

⁴³ Dora Alexander, “Russia, Leave God’s Moon Alone” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn8PPidkw5I> (accessed June 15, 2015).

⁴⁴ The open critique of the space program can be contrasted against the songs of the Soviet Union which “were specifically about the heroic adventures of the cosmonauts.” Marilyn Dudley-Flores and Thomas Gangale, “Public Moods Toward Space Through Analysis of Popular Music: An Astrosociological Application,” *Aerospace America*, 2, 2010, http://ops-alaska.com/publications/2010/2010_PublicMoodsTowardSpace.pdf.

⁴⁵ Lightnin’ Hopkins, “Happy Blues for John Glenn” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn8PPidkw5I> (accessed June 15, 2015).

⁴⁶ Billy Hogan, “Shake it Over Sputnik” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdtYBO1Dm7E> (accessed June 15, 2015).

space exploration and its lack of concern for the health and well-being of impoverished African Americans living in urban ghettos.⁴⁷ He directly attacks the inequality in expenditures on the space program and the returns for individuals. His critique is rooted in race and class, and draws attention to the plight of individuals who presumably have not benefited from this globalized technology. “Whitey on the Moon” is interesting because the critique is divorced from Cold War narratives and focused on how global technology has failed to raise local living standards.

A very similar theme resonates in a more recent song by the Alabama based indie rock band The Drive-By Truckers, “Putting People on the Moon,” which again sets up a strain between relevant socioeconomic problems and the amount of money spent on the space program.⁴⁸ “Putting People on the Moon” inhabits a particularly regional gaze, as the singer Patterson Hood (who’s from northwestern Alabama a historically impoverished area adjacent to Huntsville, Alabama where the Marshall Space Flight Center was established in 1960) describes the life in a rural Alabama:

Double Digit unemployment, TVA be shutting soon
While over there in Huntsville, They puttin' people on the moon.

The narrative is set in the 1980s (“Goddamn Reagan’s in the White House”) and as a result matches themes adopted by Scott-Heron. Highlighting the lack of political interest in those outside the pale of technological advances, both artists call into question whether space really is being used for the “benefit of all mankind.”

V. Understanding the Southern Construction of the Space Age

The space narratives reflected in southern music help to illustrate two dominant points about how the space age was and is reflected in southern culture. A primary observation is that rather than reflecting a stereotype of agrarian backwardness and technophobia, these songs reflect a culture that is in conversation with emerging global culture and politics and that is being shaped by the advances of the space age. This reflects southern society’s role as a participant in space exploration, such as was seen in “Shake it over Sputnik.”⁴⁹ Far from technophobic, much of this music embraces scientific discovery and wonder, and touts American achievements. Maybe one of the emblematic images of this is the cover of Elvis Presley’s 1973 album *Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite*, which features a telecommunications satellite prominently on the cover.⁵⁰ Presley, a

⁴⁷ Gil Scott-Heron, “Whitey on the Moon” available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goh2x_G0ct4 (accessed June 15, 2015).

⁴⁸ Drive-By Truckers, “Putting People on the Moon” available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xeYGo33_wkY (accessed June 15, 2015). The Drive-By Truckers also address this same North Alabama setting in the mournful “Space City,” in which Huntsville stands as an emblem of false hope from technological advances “Space City’s one hour up the road from me /Its one hour away from as close to the moon as anybody down here’s ever gonna be.” Drive-By Truckers, “Space City” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbzfpSPKAwY> (accessed June 15, 2015).

⁴⁹ *Supra* note 46.

⁵⁰ Elvis Presley, *Aloha from Hawaii Live Via Satellite* (RCA 1973).

Mississippi native and arguably one of the world's first truly international superstar, has adopted an album cover and title that explicitly acknowledges the technology that made international stardom possible.

A second observation is the degree of political motivation within the songs. When skepticism is the theme, it generally cuts along political boundaries. Even religious songs like "Russia, Leave God's Moon Alone," reflect an acute awareness of the Cold War.⁵¹ Other songs use the Space Age to illustrate for both racial and social inequality, but the emphasis is on the opportunity gap for technology as opposed to being anti-technological advancement. The strong political themes in these songs denotes a recognition that technology is political, a theme that is likely reflected in similar southern narratives about railways and farming.

The Space Age reflected through southern culture, therefore, is a network of ideas that reflect a complex understanding of what space exploration meant both at the global and local levels. These layers of meaning cut across religion, science, and politics and create a southern awareness that the world was changing and what that meant. It also reflects the unique southern experience of seeing firsthand the paradox of the wealth involved technological innovation sited next impoverishment.

VI. Conclusion

Space remains a theme in southern music today with many artists still exploring the theme across a variety of genres. This article stops short of a full survey of southern music and focuses primarily on music that coincided with the Cold War and the Space Race. This is, in part, a noted peak in songs about space in the 1960s.⁵² There is much more music to be investigated.⁵³ While modern southern music, aside from the Drive-By Truckers as noted above, lacks many of the political overtures, space themes still play an important role in this music. Much of it focuses on the wonder and excitement of exploring the unknown, such as the psychedelic explorations found in songs like Widespread Panic's "Space Wrangler"⁵⁴ or the cosmic instrumentals such as the Mystery Men's "Preparation Space."⁵⁵

Indeed, themes of exploration have strong roots in jazz with Sun Ra's cosmic philosophy that played out through his various recordings. The exploratory nature of jazz lends itself to absorbing the space metaphor in the creation of audio landscapes. However, the political themes of African American music have not been completely abandoned. Sun Ra's instrumental jazz was complimented by a series of lectures that he gave at UC Berkeley titled "The Black Man in the

⁵¹ See also Rijn, *supra* note, 116, 124-126.

⁵² Dudley-Flores and Gangale, "Public Moods," *supra* note 44, at 2.

⁵³ Indeed, Dudley-Flores and Gangale note a similar peak in the production of space music in the 1990s and 2000s. Dudley-Flores and Gangale, "Public Moods," *supra* note 44, at 3. Southern examples include Widespread Panic, "Space Wrangler," (1988); The Mystery Men, "Preparation Space," (2011); Irvin Mayfield, "Moonscape" (2003); The Flaming Lips, "Watching the Planets" (2009); Outkast, "E.T. (Extraterrestrial)" and "ATLiens" (1996); Drive-By Truckers, "Space City" (2006).

⁵⁴ Widespread Panic, "Space Wrangler" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJUriJqTG9M> (accessed June 15, 2015)

⁵⁵ Mystery Men, "Preparation Space" available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIVJVPIbDww> (accessed June 15, 2015)

Cosmos” in 1972.⁵⁶ Sun Ra’s brand of Afrofuturism is still reflected in works such as Outkast’s *ATLiens*.⁵⁷ This album uses space themes to indicate the alienation and isolation of African Americans in southern culture (indicated by the “ATL,” an abbreviation for Atlanta, Georgia). Space maintains its place as a metaphor for both exploration and external isolation.

As space exploration has become more and more common and integrated into society, space themes have continued, but they now tap into common understandings of technology. Instead of addressing major political changes and upheaval, space in southern music now reflects the integration of the technology into everyday life in a spacefaring society. Perhaps the best example of this is the Alabama surf rock group Man or Astro-man? The band’s name itself problematizes the question of the status of humankind in the space age.⁵⁸ This is coupled with consistent science fiction themes across the band’s music and artwork, which indicates a full engagement in the cultural aspects of a spacefaring society.

Of course, the question of “man or astro-man?” is a binary simplification that queries identity. As the Space Age dawned, it became intermingled with terrestrial social structures, and in the South the Space Age entered into a landscape of complex constructions of identity built around deep historical structures involving race and gender.⁵⁹ This brief article seeks to give a window into the cultural production that resulted as these phenomena interacted, but it truly only scrapes the surface of such representations. Music is just a small facet of the picture, and it is hoped that this research will be useful to related studies that seek to understand how the project of space exploration was represented across a range of cultural artifacts.

⁵⁶ See “Sun Ra’s Full Lecture & Reading List From His 1971 UC Berkeley Course, “The Black Man in the Cosmos,” *Open Culture* (July 21, 2013): <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www.openculture.com/2014/07/full-lecture-and-reading-list-from-sun-ras-1971-uc-berkeley-course.html>.

⁵⁷ Outkast, *ATLiens* (LaFace Records 1996).

⁵⁸ The theme of transhumanism is one that is often found in the social sciences literature of space. *See generally*, George S. Robinson, “Addressing the Legal Status of Evolving ‘Envoys of Mankind,’” *Annals of Air and Space Law* 36 (2011): 447–512.

⁵⁹ *See generally*, P.J. Blount and Dave Molina, “The Distance from the Ghetto to the Moon: Contextualizing the Space Program in the Discourse of the American Civil Rights Movement,” in Brian Odum, ed., *NASA and the Long Civil Rights Movement* (tentative) (forthcoming Florida State University Press 2018).