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## Roy Acuff, Democratic Candidate

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Roy Acuff, Democratic Candidate

By

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Bachelor of Arts  
University of South Carolina, 2014

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to analyze the ways in which fame, cultural capital, and the political landscape of Tennessee placed the political amateur Roy Acuff in a strong position to win the 1944 Democratic primary, adding to our understanding of how fame can impact American politics, and also enriching our understanding of party politics in the single-party Solid South. The first part pays close attention to Acuff's entertainment career prior to his political engagement with an eye to exploring why Tennessee voters thought Acuff would be a good candidate for governor. The second part details Roy Acuff's political engagement from the time reporters at the *Tennessean* began circulating nominating petitions for his Democratic candidacy in 1943 until Acuff declined to run as either a Democrat or Republican in 1944. The conclusion briefly considers Roy Acuff's 1948 Republican run to expand on the argument that his 1944 Democratic run was viable and to move towards an understanding of what it meant to be a Republican in the South in the 1940s.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1943, Prentice Cooper, the Democratic Governor of Tennessee, refused to attend a party celebrating the nationwide distribution of the Grand Ole Opry radio show, disparaging country music for “disgracing the state” of Tennessee, and blaming country star Roy Acuff for making Nashville the “hillbilly capital of the United States.”<sup>1</sup> In response, staff members of the *Nashville Tennessean* half-jokingly entered Acuff into the Democratic gubernatorial primary, betting that his fame could catapult him to the governorship.<sup>2</sup> Although he was a lifelong Republican and hesitant to enter into politics, he gave the idea of running in the Democratic primary sincere consideration before declining to run.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time he declined to run as a Democratic candidate,

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Pareles, “Roy Acuff, 89, Singer, Dies; The King of Country Music,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1992, D20; Peter La Chapelle, *I’d Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 114-115.

<sup>2</sup> La Chapelle, 114-115; Elizabeth Schlappi, *Roy Acuff: The Smoky Mountain Boy* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1978), 182-183.

<sup>3</sup> Schlappi, 183-187.

Carroll County, Tennessee Republicans collected enough signatures to qualify him as a Republican candidate for governor.<sup>4</sup> He publicly declined that qualification as well to stem the tide of letters urging him to run as a Republican.<sup>5</sup> Five years later, in 1948, after Acuff issued a statement explaining that he would mount a serious campaign if he won the Republican primary, local Republican officials again collected enough signatures to qualify Acuff as a candidate for governor.<sup>6</sup> Although once again he was qualified without his knowledge, this time it was with his general consent. Too busy working on a movie in Hollywood to actively campaign, he still managed to win four times as many votes as his primary challenger on the strength of his stardom alone.<sup>7</sup> After winning the 1948 nomination, Acuff mounted a more serious candidacy on a moderate platform based on opposition to the poll tax, support for increased old-age pensions, free textbooks for children, and opposition to machine politics, as well as the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments.<sup>8</sup> Running as a Republican in a state dominated by Democrats, he still “garnered about 33.1 percent of the vote – 10 percent more than the next two Republican gubernatorial candidates would.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Pareles, “Roy Acuff”; La Chapelle, 110-115.

<sup>9</sup> La Chapelle, 95, 100.

Country music historian Peter La Chapelle and Acuff biographer Elizabeth Schlappi's versions of this story proceed like the one above, framing Acuff's 1943 and 1944 qualifications for the Democratic and Republican gubernatorial primaries as a response to Prentice Cooper's disparagement of country music and as a prelude of sorts to his seemingly more consequential 1948 candidacy as a Republican.<sup>10</sup> He did actually run in 1948, after all. In Acuff's *New York Times* obituary, his qualifications for the 1944 Democratic and Republican gubernatorial primaries are characterized as protest candidacies in response to Cooper's denigration of country music.<sup>11</sup> This framing seems to imply that the reporters at the *Tennessean* and others who supported an Acuff candidacy were more interested in defending the respectability of country music than in catalyzing real political change. In reality, however, the groups that sought to qualify Acuff for both the Democratic and Republican gubernatorial primaries did so out of sincere political convictions. If the Democrats who sought to qualify Acuff for the gubernatorial primary saw his qualification as a protest, it was a protest against the political machine of E.H. Crump, which backed Cooper and had dominated Tennessee politics over the preceding decade and a half, not one in support of the respectability of country music.<sup>12</sup> Prentice Cooper's comments may have inspired the reporters at the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 114-115; Schlappi, 182-183.

<sup>11</sup> Pareles, "Roy Acuff."

<sup>12</sup> V.O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1949), 59.



*Tennessean* to qualify Acuff for the Democratic primary, but opposition to the Crump-dominated state government was the point of the qualification for anti-Crump Democrats. Carroll County Republicans, meanwhile, qualified him for the Republican primary in hopes that his fame could secure a Republican victory in a heavily Democratic state.

Further, these accounts minimize how seriously Acuff considered running as a Democratic candidate in 1944, despite his East Tennessee Republican heritage, and how dangerous his potential candidacy seemed to the Crump-dominated faction of the Democratic Party that controlled Tennessee at the time. While the anti-Crump Democrats sought to nominate Acuff for their own political purposes, Acuff actually considered running as a Democrat out of a sense of duty to his fellow Tennesseans. And this potential Democratic candidacy made E.H. Crump, who had handpicked the winner of every statewide office since 1932 through his control of the Democratic primary, very nervous.<sup>13</sup> None of Crump's affiliates wanted to run against Roy Acuff in a Democratic primary at the height of his fame, and a Crump-backed candidate only emerged after Acuff had safely withdrawn from the race. Among voters, reporters, and politicians, the popular perception while Acuff was considering a Democratic candidacy was that if he chose to run in the Democratic primary, he would win. And up until he officially declined to run, the consensus was that the fate of the Tennessee Democratic primary was in his hands. While the scholarly focus on Acuff's 1948 Republican candidacy is

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

understandable, since that was the only time Acuff actually mounted a political campaign, Acuff was actually closest to winning the governorship, and at his most threatening to the Crump machine, as a potential Democratic candidate in 1944. This is because, despite his lack of political experience, his massive national fame meant that his victory in the Democratic primary could not be ruled out. Winning in the Democratic primary would be tantamount to winning the general election, moreover, because the Republican minority was too small for Republicans to contest statewide races.<sup>14</sup> Because his 1944 qualification for the Democratic primary put him in a more serious position to become the governor of Tennessee than his actual 1948 Republican candidacy, his 1944 qualification for the Democratic primary warrants closer scholarly investigation.

This thesis aims to analyze the ways in which fame, cultural capital, and the political landscape of Tennessee placed the political amateur Roy Acuff in a strong position to win the 1944 Democratic primary, adding to our understanding of how fame can impact American politics, and also enriching our understanding of politics in the single-party Solid South. The first part pays close attention to Acuff's entertainment career prior to his political engagement with an eye to exploring why Tennessee voters thought Acuff would be a good candidate for governor. Because Acuff's fame cannot be disentangled from the *Grand Ole Opry* radio show, which propelled him to national fame, part one also sketches the growth of that show from a regional to a national

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 60.

success. Developments in Tennessee and national politics are also detailed throughout this section to better set the stage for Acuff's subsequent political engagement.

The second part details Roy Acuff's political engagement from the time reporters at the *Tennessean* began circulating nominating petitions for his Democratic candidacy in 1943 until Acuff declined to run as either a Democrat or Republican in 1944. This section seeks to underscore the seriousness with which he considered running as a Democrat and to detail the extent to which voters, the political press, and Tennessee political figures found his success as a Democratic candidate plausible. It also seeks to demonstrate his viability as a candidate in light of the successful candidacies of radio host and hillbilly star W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, who won the Democratic primary to become governor of Texas in 1938 before moving on to the US Senate in 1941, and recording star Jimmie Davis, who won the Democratic primary to become governor of Louisiana in 1944.<sup>15</sup> Many of the policy views Acuff expressed while considering running as a Democrat in 1944 were similar to those expressed by O'Daniel and Davis in their successful Democratic primary runs, and he was more famous nationally in 1944 than either of them were when they ran, making it difficult to rule out his potential for victory had he stayed in the race.

The conclusion briefly considers Roy Acuff's 1948 Republican run to expand on this viability thesis and move towards an understanding of what it meant to be a Republican in the South in the 1940s. As Peter La Chapelle points out, Acuff's platform

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<sup>15</sup> La Chapelle, 83-84.

as a Republican candidate in 1948 was similar to the Democratic platforms of O’Daniel and Davis, and I would add that it was virtually the same as the one Acuff outlined while publicly considering running as a Democrat in 1944.<sup>16</sup> This begs some questions about what exactly the difference was between Democrats and Republicans in the South at this time, why Acuff’s platform failed if it was similar to the successful platforms of O’Daniel and Davis, and why Acuff chose to run as a Republican, if running as a Democrat was a more viable route to victory. In attempting to sketch answers to these questions, this section illuminates more broadly our understanding of what Republicanism meant in the South at this time, the importance of party labels to local governance and federal patronage, and how these imperatives outweighed advancing a particular set of policy goals in the South.

While some works on the intersection of popular culture and politics do exist, most scholarship on the link between American music and politics focuses on the links between popular music and progressive movements, from the leftist folk of Woody Guthrie through the relationship between the antiwar movement and popular music in the 1960s. Scholarly analysis of politics and country music, however, is just beginning. Peter La Chapelle’s 2019 *I’d Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* is one of the first works to establish the links between country music and politics, focusing on the ways in which Southern politicians across the political spectrum attempted to harness the notion of authenticity within country music to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

political ends, by playing music themselves on the campaign trail, hiring performers to attract audiences to their campaign events, or attempting to use their fame to transition to political careers of their own. While La Chapelle's book touches on Acuff's foray into politics, it mostly focuses on his unsuccessful 1948 Republican gubernatorial run, comparing it to the successful candidacies of W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, who became governor of Texas in 1938 before moving on to the US Senate, and Jimmie Davis, who became governor of Louisiana in 1944.<sup>17</sup> Analyzing the response to Acuff's potential Democratic candidacy helps flesh out the comparison between Acuff, O'Daniel, and Davis by demonstrating that the same cultural trends that propelled O'Daniel and Davis to the Texas and Louisiana governorships, respectively, also placed Acuff in a viable position for the Tennessee governorship, had he not taken himself out of the race in 1944.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to expanding the relatively small body of country music scholarship generally, and the even smaller historiography on the link between country music and politics, this work also pays particular attention to Roy Acuff's 1944 qualification for the Democratic and Republican primaries. While it has received some passing scholarly attention as an interesting but inconsequential aside in the context of his short political career – which itself is more often treated as an interesting factoid in the context of his

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<sup>17</sup> La Chapelle, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, in order for La Chapelle to compare campaign styles, he had to analyze Acuff's 1948 run, since Acuff did not campaign in 1944.

music career – this article recenters his political entanglements. Acuff’s consideration of the Democratic primary had a serious possibility of upending the political order in the state of Tennessee. This work not only builds upon the historiography of country music generally and the work of La Chapelle specifically, but also adds depth to our understanding of Roy Acuff as a historical figure.

It also examines an important episode in history of the politics of Tennessee, contributing to our historiographical understanding of Southern politics generally during the 1940s as well as those of Tennessee, specifically. While this thesis primarily argues for the importance of Acuff’s qualification for the 1944 Democratic primary, perhaps the most important historiographical contribution is its analysis of Acuff’s engagement with Republican politics in Tennessee, and the meaning of Republicanism in the state. The role of the GOP in the South between the end of Reconstruction and the advent of the Southern Strategy is a subject that has largely been ignored in political scholarship, and, like the intersection of country music and politics, has only recently begun to be investigated.<sup>19</sup> Though it may seem counterintuitive that a piece largely focused on the Democratic politics of Tennessee might make such a historiographical contribution, this work begins with the premise that the nature of Democratic power in the state can only be understood in contrast with the role of the Republican Party, which dominated the local politics of eastern Tennessee even as it was relatively inconsequential in statewide

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<sup>19</sup> Boris Heersink and Jeffery A. Jenkins, *Republican Party Politics and the American South, 1865-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

aces. Only by understanding the position of the Tennessee Republican Party can we assert that a Democratic Acuff candidacy would be more viable than a Republican one. And only by examining what Republicanism meant in the state can we begin to understand why Acuff declined to run as a Democrat and decided to run as a Republican, especially considering that the failure of his 1948 candidacy seems to have hinged more so on party affiliation than on policy preferences. A corollary to the argument that Acuff was in a position to win the governorship had he remained in the Democratic primary in 1944 is that running as a Republican precluded his victory in the 1948 general election. The argument that Acuff seemed closer to capturing the governorship as a Democrat in 1944 is important, then, not because it affirms Democratic dominance in the South, which is already well known to scholars, but because, as a foil to Acuff's unsuccessful 1948 run as a Republican, it demonstrates the limits of Republican power in the South and in Tennessee at that time.

## Chapter 2: Roy Acuff, the Singer

Roy Claxton Acuff was born on September 15, 1903, in Maynardville, Tennessee, the middle of five children and the son of a Baptist minister and self-taught country lawyer.<sup>20</sup> His father Neill Acuff and grandfather Corum Acuff were both East Tennessee Republicans.<sup>21</sup> Union County, in which Maynardville is located, was named for its allegiance to the Union in the Civil War.<sup>22</sup> A distaste for slavery in the antebellum period among East Tennesseans led many East Tennessee counties, including Union County, to resist secession.<sup>23</sup> Along with several other East Tennessee counties during the Civil War, its residents initially voted against secession, and then attempted to secede from the Confederacy and remain loyal the Union.<sup>24</sup> Like thousands of other East Tennesseans who took up arms in opposition to the Confederacy, Roy Acuff's grandfather, Corum Acuff, joined the Union Army, and after the war he served as a

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<sup>20</sup> Schlappi, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Schlappi, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Schlappi, 4-5; Joe Hatcher, "Politics," *The Nashville Tennessean*, May 21, 1944, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Key, 75.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*; La Chapelle, 95.



Republican legislator in the Tennessee General Assembly.<sup>25</sup> Acuff's father followed suit, serving as a general sessions judge for Knox County.<sup>26</sup>

The era following Reconstruction was one characterized by national Republican dominance and Democratic control of the South.<sup>27</sup> After a short-lived postwar Radical Republican government, Republicans in Tennessee returned to minority status in 1869, but maintained significant strength in the eastern part of the state for the next century,

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<sup>25</sup> Key, 76; Schlappi, 3-4; Goodspeed Publishing Co., *History of Tennessee from the Earliest Time to the Present; Together with an Historical and a Biographical Sketch of from Twenty-five to Thirty Counties of East Tennessee, Besides a Valuable Fund of Notes, Original Observations, Reminiscences, Etc., Etc.* (Nashville: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1887), 1146. Acuff's biographer Elizabeth Schlappi claims that Corum Acuff fought for the Union Army, and Corum Acuff's entry in the Goodspeed history of Tennessee explains that he fought for "Company D" of the "First Tennessee Federal Infantry," but in an August 28, 1949 article for *The Nashville Tennessean*, Acuff remarked that his grandfather "fought with the Confederates at the Battle of Pennington Gap."

<sup>26</sup> Schlappi, 183.

<sup>27</sup> Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 14-15; Dewey W. Grantham, "Tennessee and Twentieth-Century American Politics," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 212.

controlling one fifth of Tennessee's House and state House seats in this time period.<sup>28</sup> Republican control was so thorough in East Tennessee that esteemed political scientist V.O. Key, Jr. described Tennessee's political system as "not one one-party system but rather two one-party systems," elaborating that "[w]ithin their respective strongholds, neither [party] is seriously challenged by the other."<sup>29</sup> While the pattern Key observed may have been the rule for most of the period after Reconstruction, Republicans did successfully win the governorship four times in that period by taking advantage of Democratic factionalism.<sup>30</sup> In 1880, Republican Alvin Hawkins capitalized on Democratic divisions over state debt to win the governorship.<sup>31</sup> Thirty years later, another Republican, Ben Hooper, won two consecutive terms with the support of prohibitionist Democrats.<sup>32</sup> In 1920, Alf Taylor, who along with his Democratic brother Bob pioneered the use of fiddles as a campaign tool, capitalized on a Democratic split over taxation to become the last Republican to win statewide office in the former Confederacy until the 1960s.<sup>33</sup>

During this period of limited Republican competitiveness in Tennessee, and national Republican dominance, Roy Acuff came of age. He showed some interest in

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<sup>28</sup> Heersink and Jenkins, 290.

<sup>29</sup> Key, 75-76.

<sup>30</sup> Grantham, 212; Heersink and Jenkins, 290.

<sup>31</sup> Heersink and Jenkins, 290.

<sup>32</sup> Grantham, 213.

<sup>33</sup> Heersink and Jenkins, 290; La Chapelle, 13-20.

music as a child, but his talents did not stand out against those of his father and uncle, who were excellent fiddlers, and his mother, who was a great singer, and played piano and guitar.<sup>34</sup> In high school, he excelled at football, basketball, and baseball, and as a young adult, his sole interest was in pursuing an athletic career.<sup>35</sup> In the spring of 1929, he was scouted by the New York Yankees, and intended to join them for training camp the following spring, but a bout of sunstroke that summer ended his athletic hopes, leaving him bedridden throughout 1930.<sup>36</sup> In 1931, while still in recovery, he took up the fiddle in earnest, learning from his father and uncle, and inadvertently improved his singing voice by making fun of his sister's operatic style, learning to sing powerfully from the pit of his stomach.<sup>37</sup> He also began spending time at a friend's garage where musicians congregated and began listening to Nashville station WSM's *Grand Ole Opry* radio program religiously.<sup>38</sup>

The *Opry* began as a Saturday night program called the *WSM Barn Dance*. WSM began on October 5, 1925 as an attempt by Edwin Craig, radio enthusiast and vice president of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, to advertise his

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<sup>34</sup> Schlappi., 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> Schlappi., 11, 13-14; Roy Acuff and William Neely, *Roy Acuff's Nashville: The Life and Good Times of Country Music* (New York: Perigee Books, 1983), 12, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Schlappi, 17-18; Acuff, 15, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Schlappi, 19; Acuff, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Acuff, 21-29.

company's services as far as the 1000 watt beam would reach.<sup>39</sup> Craig recruited 30-year-old George D. Hay of the popular *National Barn Dance* show from the Chicago station WLS to be program director.<sup>40</sup> Beginning on November 28, 1925 with an hour of fiddle music performed by 77-year-old Uncle Jimmy Thompson, Hay tried to recreate the success of the *National Barn Dance* in Nashville with the *WSM Barn Dance* program.<sup>41</sup> Soon, amateur performers willing to play for free flooded the station, and Hay asked them to adopt hillbilly personas to help better sell insurance to the company's working class customer base.<sup>42</sup> Audience members quickly became an important part of the show, as live applause added to the show's lively and informal quality.<sup>43</sup> When the twenty by fifteen foot Studio A in the National Life building became

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<sup>39</sup> *Country Music*, episode 1, "The Rub' (Beginnings – 1933)," directed by Ken Burns (2019; Arlington: PBS, 2019), DVD; Jack Hurst, *Nashville's Grand Ole Opry* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), 71. The call letters WSM stood for "We Shield Millions," a direct reflection of the station's origins in the insurance business. Atlanta's WSB was the first station in the South with 1000 watts of power.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*; Bill C. Malone & Tracey E.W. Laird, *Country Music USA: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 83. WLS was founded by Sears-Roebuck, the call letters standing for "World's Largest Store." The *National Barn Dance* began broadcasting on April 19, 1924.

<sup>41</sup> Burns, "The Rub"; Malone, 83-84.

<sup>42</sup> Burns, "The Rub."

<sup>43</sup> Chet Hagan, *Grand Ole Opry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 13.

insufficient to hold the crowd, which spilled out into the hallway, a Studio B was added to hold several hundred more.<sup>44</sup> In 1927, after affiliating with the new National Broadcasting Company network, and increasing WSM's power to 5000 watts, Craig attempted to mollify critics of country music by broadcasting NBC's *Music Appreciation Hour*, featuring the New York Symphony, just before the *Barn Dance*.<sup>45</sup> One night, after transitioning from the *Music Appreciation Hour* to the *WSM Barn Dance*, program director Hay famously remarked "[f]or the past hour we have been listening to music taken largely from grand opera, but from now on we will present 'The Grand Ole Opry,'" a name that stuck.<sup>46</sup> By 1932, WSM increased its power to 50,000 watts, making it one of the three most powerful stations in the nation.<sup>47</sup> WSM also acquired a clear-channel frequency so that no other station could operate on that frequency.<sup>48</sup> By the time Acuff had honed his fiddle skills well enough to be invited to join Doc Hauer's Medicine Show

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Malone, 89; Burns, "The Rub"; Hagan, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Malone, 89; Hurst, 92; Hagan, 24. Many sources maintain that Hay presented *The Grand Ole Opry* in 1927, but Hagan maintains that the *Music Appreciation Hour* did not start until 1928, and therefore the *Opry* could not have been called such until then.

<sup>47</sup> Hagan, 30; Hurst 104; *Country Music*, episode 2, "'Hard Times' (1933 – 1945)," directed by Ken Burns (2019; Arlington: PBS, 2019), DVD.

<sup>48</sup> Hagan, 30; Hurst 104; Burns, "Hard Times."

as a fiddler, singer, and blackface minstrel, the *Opry* was almost a national show, broadcast as far west as the Rocky Mountains.<sup>49</sup>

Soon after Acuff entered the medicine show circuit and the *Opry* began covering two-thirds of the nation, Franklin Roosevelt ascended to the presidency. Voters disillusioned with Republican President Herbert Hoover's ineffectual leadership in the face of the Great Depression elected Democratic majorities to Congress, ushering in an era characterized by six decades of national Democratic prominence.<sup>50</sup> With this, Southern Democrats moved from being the "majority component of a minority party" to a "minority wing of a majority party," but still maintained their ability to filibuster legislation that threatened white supremacy.<sup>51</sup> A tacit agreement formed in which Northern Democrats agreed not to push for changes to the existing racial status quo in exchange for Southern Democratic support of economically liberal legislation.<sup>52</sup> In the early years of the New Deal, when the effects of the Depression were more acutely felt, Southern Democrats allowed more economically liberal legislation to pass, but as the era proceeded, they were increasingly willing to work with Northern Republicans to stymie such legislation in exchange for Republican support of the filibuster.<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>49</sup> Schlappi, 20-21; Acuff, 32-36; Hagan, 30; Hurst 104; Burns, "Hard Times."

<sup>50</sup> Black and Black, 15.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 52; Grantham, 212.

<sup>52</sup> Black and Black, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2013), 16; Black and Black, 54.

unified front presented by Southern Democrats thus allowed Southern Democrats to effectively shape the contours of New Deal legislation throughout the New Deal era.<sup>54</sup> Southern Democratic opposition to organized labor and taxes, and friendliness towards business interests, meanwhile, ensured that Southern conservatives would not have to turn to the Republican Party to represent their views, which at any rate was politically toxic in the South, due to its association with the “calamities” of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Great Depression.<sup>55</sup> While Republicans still maintained local control in eastern Tennessee, in most of the South, and in western and middle Tennessee, the idea of voting for the party of Lincoln and Hoover was a nonstarter.

As the New Deal began in earnest, Acuff followed his stint with the medicine show by forming a band called the Tennessee Crackerjacks, which began to see limited success in live performances on the strength of its regional radio presence.<sup>56</sup> Formed initially to play dances and parties, by 1934 the Crackerjacks had a program of their own on Knoxville station WROL.<sup>57</sup> They soon defected to a rival Knoxville station, WNOX, performing in front of sold out crowds in the 1500-capacity Market Hall daily as part of Lowell Blanchard’s *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round*.<sup>58</sup> After being denied a raise in spite of

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<sup>54</sup> Katznelson, 15, 21, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Black and Black, 19, 41-42, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Acuff, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Schlappi, 22-23; Acuff, 50; Malone, 223. Schlappi’s account has the Tennessee Crackerjacks at WROL in 1934, while Malone places them there in 1933.

<sup>58</sup> Schlappi, 23; Acuff, 51-52; Malone, 223.

their massive success, the Crackerjacks moved back to WROL to launch a competing noontime show. At WROL they were rechristened the Crazy Tennesseans.<sup>59</sup> They remained there until Acuff became a regular performer on the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1938.<sup>60</sup>

In 1935, Roy Acuff learned his signature song, "The Great Speckled Bird."<sup>61</sup> Acuff heard bits and pieces of the song in the early 1930s and became fascinated by it.<sup>62</sup> In 1935, when Charlie Swain sang it on WROL, Acuff paid him to write down the words and incorporated it into his own act.<sup>63</sup> When he sang it for the first time on WROL, he received more fan mail asking him to sing it again than he had ever received.<sup>64</sup> He added his own verses before recording it in the Crazy Tennesseans' first recording session with the American Record Company in October 1936, and recorded another version with even more verses, "The Great Speckled Bird No. 2," for a second session in March 1937.<sup>65</sup> The song features religious overtones, imagining the church, personified by the great speckled bird, as persecuted for its devotion to God, but ultimately

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<sup>59</sup> Malone, 223.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Schlappi, 25-26. As Bill Malone notes on page 224 of *Country Music USA*, the original record labels listed the song title as "The Great Speckle Bird."

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.; Acuff, 62.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Acuff, 63.

<sup>65</sup> Schlappi, 27-29.



delivered to Heaven.<sup>66</sup> The song became hit for Acuff, as well as a hymn for the Assembly of God and the Church of God.<sup>67</sup> As the song most strongly identified with him, Acuff's musical identity became linked to the Christian values he would express as a gubernatorial candidate.<sup>68</sup>

Believing that a spot on the *Grand Ole Opry* could propel his band to "real success," Acuff began making trips to Nashville and writing letters to *Opry* executives to get on the show.<sup>69</sup> Through Joe L. Frank, an agent with Pee Wee King's band, Acuff was able to get a live audition as a fiddle player for the *Opry* in October of 1937, but he bungled it in his nervousness, fiddling poorly and offering an underwhelming crooning rendition of "The Great Speckled Bird."<sup>70</sup> In spite of this, he was offered a second chance at another live audition on February 5, 1938, forcefully singing the "Great Speckled Bird" from the pit of his stomach, as he had learned to do in front of medicine show audiences.<sup>71</sup> This time, *Opry* executives were still underwhelmed, but after bags of fan mail flooded WSM asking for Acuff to perform "The Great Speckled Bird" again, he was offered a 7am weekly program, beginning February 21, 1938.<sup>72</sup> By March 11,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 26; Malone, 224.

<sup>67</sup> Malone, 224.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 224-225; Schlappi, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Schlappi, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 33; Acuff, 66-68.

<sup>71</sup> Schlappi, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

Roy Acuff and the newly renamed Smoky Mountain Boys moved to the 6:30am slot, opening the WSM weekday programming.<sup>73</sup>

Acuff quickly rose to be one of the *Opry*'s most prominent stars on the strength of his distinct voice. When he first joined the *Opry*, the show placed a heavy emphasis on string bands and instrumental music, and when crooning vocalists did perform, audiences could not clearly hear the words on the studio's microphones.<sup>74</sup> Acuff's fan mail, in contrast, praised the distinctiveness of his voice and how clearly his words could be heard on the radio.<sup>75</sup> The demand for his vocal solos ushered in a new era for the *Opry*. Before Acuff, the *Opry* featured string bands, occasionally with singers. With Acuff, for the first time the *Opry* featured a singer with a supporting band.<sup>76</sup> Acuff became the first singing star of the *Grand Ole Opry*.<sup>77</sup>

The *Opry* and Acuff continued to grow together. In October 1939, NBC began a half hour broadcast of the *Opry* on its Red Network of 26 stations, sponsored by the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, which sold Prince Albert smoking tobacco.<sup>78</sup> In a testament to Acuff's importance to the *Opry* he was the first performer featured on the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Hagan, 49; Hurst, 109-111; Schlappi, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Hurst, 111.

<sup>76</sup> Burns, "Hard Times"; Schlappi, 59.

<sup>77</sup> Acuff, 86.

<sup>78</sup> Hagan, 53-54; Hurst, 116; Schlappi, 44.

“Prince Albert Show,” and, apparently, the only star considered to host the show.<sup>79</sup> This marked the beginning of Acuff and the *Opry* becoming nearly synonymous with one another.<sup>80</sup> By early 1940, the increased network exposure resulted in the development of a *Grand Ole Opry* film project, in which Acuff and other *Opry* performers portrayed themselves.<sup>81</sup> In the movie, the performers use their music to support an honest politician that wants to defeat corrupt politician in a governor’s race, anticipating themes that would emerge in Acuff’s 1944 qualification<sup>82</sup>

In the summer of 1940, the *Opry* organization began hosting tent shows, inspiring Acuff to launch his own the next year.<sup>83</sup> Also in 1940, Acuff and his wife Mildred compiled *Roy Acuff’s Folio of Original Songs Featured over WSM Grand Ole Opry* to copyright his songs and add an additional revenue source.<sup>84</sup> After its first *Opry* mention, Acuff sold 5000 the first week.<sup>85</sup> They sold so well that he bought his own fifteen-minute *Opry* segment to advertise them, selling over one hundred thousand in the first two months.<sup>86</sup> The profit from the songbooks funded the formation of Acuff-

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<sup>79</sup> Schlappi, 44; Burns, “Hard Times.”

<sup>80</sup> Malone, 224; Burns, “Hard Times.”

<sup>81</sup> Hagan, 54, 62; Hurst 119; Burns, “Hard Times.”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Hagan, 63; Hurst, 120-122; Schlappi, 50-51; Acuff, 123-124.

<sup>84</sup> Schlappi, 42-43.

<sup>85</sup> Acuff, 139, 141-142; Schlappi, 43.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Rose, the first music publishing company in the South, and the first in the United States to exclusively publish country songs.<sup>87</sup> Partially an attempt to further protect the ownership of his songs, Acuff approached WSM colleague Fred Rose with the idea of establishing a publishing company, and after an initial \$25,000 investment, Acuff-Rose Publications was formed on October 13, 1942.<sup>88</sup> It helped ensure Nashville's rise to prominence in the music industry, and it added to Roy Acuff's growing fortune. By 1942 Acuff had also branched out into the recording industry, becoming co-owner of the Nashville-based Hickory Records.<sup>89</sup> Between his recording income, his tent show, live performances, songbook sales, publishing income, and movies – he shot two more with Republic Pictures in 1942, *Hi Neighbor* and *O' My Darling Clementine* – Acuff earned a fortune, making upwards of \$200,000 per year.<sup>90</sup>

The advent of World War II increased Acuff's popularity and the popularity of country music generally, as Southerners migrated to urban areas for defense industry work, and Southern GIs entered barracks nationally and internationally.<sup>91</sup> During the

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<sup>87</sup> Malone, 228; Acuff, 152.

<sup>88</sup> Hagan, 74; Hurst, 138; Schlappi, 149-150; Malone, 228; Acuff, 151. Legend has it that Rose began to understand the power of country music when he saw tears streaming down Roy Acuff's face as he sang "Don't Make Me Go to Bed."

<sup>89</sup> Malone, 227.

<sup>90</sup> Schlappi, 139, 177; Malone, 227. Schlappi estimated his income at between \$50,000 and \$200,000. Most newspapers around the time use the \$200,000 figure.

<sup>91</sup> Malone 208-209, 214-215.

war, the *Opry* eclipsed Chicago's WLS *National Barn Dance* as the most important country music radio show.<sup>92</sup> Roy Acuff was so significant during World War II that, in a popularity contest staged by the Armed Forces Network's *Munich Morning Report*, he won more votes than Frank Sinatra, leading the AFN to launch the *Hillbilly Jamboree* show from Munich for American forces in Europe.<sup>93</sup> In a possibly apocryphal story, during a Japanese banzai assault on American Marine forces in Okinawa, the attackers allegedly yelled "To hell with Roosevelt! To hell with Babe Ruth! To hell with Roy Acuff!" indicating the heights to which Acuff had ascended in terms of American and international fame during the war.<sup>94</sup>

On October 9, 1943, when NBC began carrying the *Opry*'s "Prince Albert Show" on its entire 125 station network, the biggest, most important show in the fastest-growing genre, with its biggest star, would now be broadcast to corners of the nation touched by Southern migration.<sup>95</sup> The nationwide broadcast of the *Opry* represented an important step in the transformation of country music from a regional to a national genre. The *Grand Ole Opry* went from a regional to a national show, and Roy Acuff from

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-217.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*; Mark Ribowsky, *Hank: The Short Life and Long Country Road of Hank Williams* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 94;

<sup>95</sup> Hagan, 88; Hurst, 137; "Grand Ole Opry NBC Network Is Enlarged," *The Nashville Tennessean*, October 9, 1943, 5. Hagan and Hurst write that it would span 125 stations, while the *Tennessean* counts 129.

a regional to a national star. That it would happen in Nashville was not preordained, given the early preeminence of the WLS *National Barn Dance* in Chicago, and the proliferation of other regional stations with their own Barn Dance-themed shows. Nashville's rise resulted from the combined efforts of its biggest show and its biggest star: through WSM's 50,000 watt station; through the *Opry's* collection of top country music talent; and through Acuff-Rose's exclusive publication of country songs. The first broadcast of the "Prince Albert Show" marked not only an important step in the national arrival of country music, but the solidification of Nashville as its gravitational center.<sup>96</sup> Tennesseans could be proud that their regional music was becoming a national and international phenomenon, and that their state capital was its most important city. In this context, it is no wonder that historians have found Prentice Cooper's disparagement, occurring at the exact moment the *Opry* achieved national recognition, to be sufficient motivation for Tennesseans proud of Nashville's place in country music to put forth Roy Acuff as a protest candidate. While Cooper's disparagement was part of it, the actual motivation was a bit more complex.

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<sup>96</sup> In Jefferey J. Lange's *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly*, Lange refers to the war years as representing "the *Grand Ole Opry's* adolescence, the period between the show's prewar pubescent regionalism and its postwar maturity into country music's paramount barn dance" (page 82).

### Chapter 3: Roy Acuff, the Politician

When the term-limited Governor Prentice Cooper lamented the rise of the *Opry*, it gave reporters from the *Nashville Tennessean* the idea to nominate Roy Acuff, the *Opry*'s personification. While their effort to qualify Acuff for the Democratic primary is often read as a semi-serious rebuke of the governor's distaste for country music, in the context of the 1943 Tennessee political landscape, it was actually more of a rebuke of "Boss" E.H. Crump's machine politics, of which Cooper was a product. From 1932, Crump dominated Tennessee politics from Memphis.<sup>97</sup> In a state of 1.6 million eligible voters, where only a quarter participated in elections, and only a quarter of those 400,000 votes were cast by Republicans, whichever Democratic faction could gain the majority of 300,000 Democratic votes could control the state.<sup>98</sup> Because Crump guaranteed 50,000 votes for his preferred candidate, a full one-third of the 150,000 votes needed to win the Democratic primary, he controlled statewide races with a fraction of the electorate and intimidated potential challengers.<sup>99</sup> Prentice Cooper, like all Tennessee governors from 1932 to 1946, was Crump's handpicked candidate.

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<sup>97</sup> Key, 64.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

Crump's coalition was split between western Tennessee, where Memphis is located, and eastern Tennessee, where local politics were dominated by Republicans, leaving East Tennessee Democrats to look for patronage from Nashville or Washington.<sup>100</sup> As long as Crump controlled the state house, and as long as Democrats controlled the federal government, Crump could command the loyalty of East Tennessee Democrats through state and federal patronage.<sup>101</sup> Republicans in Tennessee had no chance of winning statewide elections, and were content to accept control of local governments in the eastern part of the state and some federal patronage in exchange for supporting Crump candidates in open primaries and not mounting serious challenges in statewide races.<sup>102</sup> Given this state of affairs, the most viable opposition party in the state was not the Republican Party, but rather a faction of middle Tennessee anti-machine Democrats based in Nashville.<sup>103</sup>

The anti-machine faction descended generally from the followers of Austin Peay, who defeated Republican fiddler Alf Taylor to win the governorship in 1922, and served until death in 1927.<sup>104</sup> Peay's faction, supported by Luke Lea, the owner of *The Nashville Tennessean*, favored a strong executive, wanted to concentrate power in the state

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-17; Grantham, 214.



government, and courted rural voters.<sup>105</sup> This faction lost credibility after a 1931 legislative investigation found mismanagement, waste, and fraud in the administration of Peay's successor, Henry Horton.<sup>106</sup> One casualty of the investigation was Luke Lea himself, who was forced to serve a prison sentence and whose political influence never recovered. In 1932, Crump's faction, which favored local autonomy, the power of the state legislature over the executive, and courted urban voters, took control of the state government with the election of Hill McAlister, beginning a decade and a half of the domination of Tennessee politics by the Crump machine. Still, the anti-machine faction mounted frequent challenges to the Crump machine throughout the 1930s and 1940s, attacking Crump for courting the black vote and thus challenging white supremacy.<sup>107</sup> Silliman Evans, the new publisher of the *Nashville Tennessean*, played an important role in this faction, supporting anti-machine candidates with his paper and involving himself with anti-machine campaign management.<sup>108</sup>

When Elmer Hinton, the *Tennessean's* state news editor, filed a petition with Russel Kramer, the state Democratic Party chairman, for Acuff's nomination, he neither knew nor cared whether Acuff was a Republican or Democrat. But this does not mean

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<sup>105</sup> Grantham, 214-215.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 215-216.

<sup>107</sup> Key, 70-71; David D. Lee, "The Triumph of Boss Crump: The Tennessee Gubernatorial Election of 1932," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1976): 396-399.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

he chose to nominate Acuff as a Democrat at random, or by default. Like the proprietor of the *Tennessean*, Hinton likely understood that the only serious challenge to Crump's dominance was through the anti-machine Democratic faction, not the Republican Party. Viewed by the reporters mostly as a joke, insofar as the stunt represented anything serious, it highlighted a struggle over whether the state would be controlled by the Crump Democrats or the anti-Crump Democrats, not over country music's respectability.<sup>109</sup> Governor Cooper's *Opry* snub was the inspiration to qualify Acuff as a Democratic candidate, not the motivation.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Schlappi., 183.

<sup>110</sup> It is worth noting that, although Acuff's biographer Elizabeth Schlappi learned in an interview with *Tennessean* editor Elmer Hinton that he and other reporters for the *Tennessean* were the ones that collected the initial signatures, the coverage in the *Tennessean* does not reveal its reporters' role in fabricating the story. The *Tennessean* attributes the scoop that nominating petitions had been filed on Acuff's behalf to the *Upper Sumner Press*, and quotes that publication in asserting that the petition "appeared to be 'a spontaneous outburst of enthusiasm and a friendly gesture on the part of his friends and admirers,'" leaving out that among these friends and admirers were apparently reporters at the *Tennessean*. And throughout its coverage of Acuff's potential candidacy, the *Tennessean* would continually attribute his nomination to unnamed "friends" without noting that its own reporters were among them. It is unclear why the *Tennessean* did not break the story itself, if it actually did have a role in putting Acuff's nomination into motion, or reveal its role in circulating the petitions later

It was also not unheard of for hillbilly performers to win elections and upend Democratic political machines, and by 1943 Roy Acuff was the most famous of all. In Tennessee, brothers and amateur fiddlers Bob and Alf Taylor had won Congressional seats and gubernatorial races on the strength of their fiddles, and Al Gore Sr. had won a 1938 Congressional race as well.<sup>111</sup> Texas radio star Pappy O'Daniel, meanwhile, had won the Texas governorship without the support of the South Texas political bosses in 1938 and 1940, and was representing Texas in the Senate.<sup>112</sup> Hillbilly star Jimmie Davis also appeared poised to defeat the combined efforts of Huey Long's machine and New Orleans mayor Robert Maestri's Old Regulars.<sup>113</sup> Because of Acuff's radio popularity, his status as a movie star, and because, as Hank Williams later put it, "[f]or drawing power in the South, it was Roy Acuff, then God," his success as a candidate could not be ruled

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on. Maybe the editors did not feel comfortable breaking a story that its staff had a role in creating, or maybe it wanted to uphold an image of political neutrality, since in the same article in which it breaks the Acuff for governor story, it admonishes the *Upper Sumner Press* as "one of those [newspapers] still saying what it thinks politically at all times." There is also the possibility that the reporters were not actually involved with circulating the petition, and that Hinton inserted himself into the story after the fact, but it seems most plausible that the *Tennessean* did not want to appear to favor a potential candidate for office.

<sup>111</sup> La Chapelle, 18-20, 238.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 84, 91, 113-114.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 84, 91-93, 98.

out, especially in light of the political victories of other fiddlers and hillbilly performers.<sup>114</sup>

The biggest hurdle for Hinton would not be upending the Crump machine if Acuff chose to run. It would be convincing him to run as a Democrat in the first place. Not only did Acuff come from a tradition of East Tennessee Republicans, including his father and grandfather, he had campaigned on behalf of Republican candidates as well, and usually voted Republican.<sup>115</sup> Despite his heritage, Acuff did not put the issue to rest immediately. On October 15, 1943, when the *Tennessean* broke the story that nominating petitions for Acuff were circulating, Acuff claimed no knowledge, but also said “[a]lthough I have no political aims, if the people of Tennessee want me for their governor, I might consider it.”<sup>116</sup> By October 29<sup>th</sup>, Acuff’s candidacy “received more statewide and certainly more national attention than any other candidate,” and was

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<sup>114</sup> Jefferey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music’s Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 43; Burns, “Hard Times.”

<sup>115</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Politics,” May 21, 1944, 1; Schlappi, 183.

<sup>116</sup> Joe Hatcher, “‘Hillbilly’ Political Campaigning for Tennessee? Roy Acuff Movement for Governor Reported On,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, October 15, 1943, 1, 17.

being described as the “Acuff ‘boom,’” despite Acuff’s hesitancy to run.<sup>117</sup> Governor Cooper privately showed the first signs of worry at the prospect of an Acuff candidacy, telling his cabinet and a group of Young Democrats to continue “to spread the gospel of [the Acuff candidacy as] a ‘joke’ lest the boom become serious from popular demand.”<sup>118</sup> The *Tennessean* affirmed this impression, reporting that “[t]he Acuff idea was started somewhat as a friendly gag,” noting that “Roy didn’t take it seriously until the petition signing began to assume the proportions of a bandwagon movement.”<sup>119</sup> A *Time* magazine article, meanwhile, asserted that “Boss Ed wants no independent candidate challenging his well-oiled, 34-year-old state machine, particularly anyone like Roy Acuff ... if Acuff can transfer his popularity to politics, he may yet give Crump the Memphis Blues.”<sup>120</sup> Already at this early stage, the potential for an Acuff candidacy was generating interest and posing a threat to the Crump machine.

Acuff remained silent through November, but interest in his candidacy continued to be a topic of speculation. *Tennessean* opinion contributor Albert Hines published a tongue-in-cheek column declaring “we think it would be a serious mistake for Roy Acuff

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<sup>117</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Acuff-for-Governor Movement Draws Nation-Wide Attention; Time Gives Blurb; Cooper Shows Interest,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, October 29, 1943, 1.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> “A Challenge to Boss Crump?,” *Time*, November 1, 1943,

<http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,933251,00.html>.

to run ... because we think if he does he will be elected.”<sup>121</sup> Hines treated the subject jokingly, but he did not underestimate Acuff’s ability to win “[i]f one-tenth of one-half per cent of his Tennessee audience goes to the polls in his behalf.”<sup>122</sup> In a November 28<sup>th</sup> letter to the editor, meanwhile, a citizen of Nashville acknowledged that the candidacy “seems to be gaining some momentum,” expressing genuine concern that Acuff’s “fitness for such an important office should be frankly, freely and truthfully given the voters now before a silly sentiment gains headway,” concluding, if he “has the courage to use [his] ability in the interests of the state and will purge all the political parasites ... then I say elect him.”<sup>123</sup>

Finally, on December 28, 1943, Roy Acuff confirmed that he was considering running for governor, and outlined serious policy views. In an interview with reporters, Acuff “frankly admitted he couldn’t answer some of the questions,” revealing “himself to be an amateur at politics,” but he left “no doubt to his sincerity” as a candidate.<sup>124</sup> Acuff opposed the poll tax, and favored amending the state constitution to do away

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<sup>121</sup> Albert Hines, “It Wouldn’t Do,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, November 7, 1943, 24.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> J.A. Daugherty, “State’s Best Interest,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, November 24, 1943, 4.

<sup>124</sup> “Acuff Lashes Poll Tax, Digs At McKellar,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, December 28, 1943, 1.

with it if necessary.<sup>125</sup> He approved of Tennessee's gasoline tax and local option liquor law, which allowed counties to vote on whether or not to prohibit the sale of alcohol.<sup>126</sup> He also supported banning fireworks sales and permitting women to serve on juries, as well as having Tennessee participate in postwar planning and removing political influence from state educational institutions.<sup>127</sup> Acuff was not prepared to answer questions on expanding the state income tax beyond capital gains to include salaries, implementing a sales or severance tax, or exempting homesteads from taxation, revealing his ignorance of the issues but also demonstrating his capacity for straightforwardness and honesty.<sup>128</sup>

He also laid the groundwork for his argument that his business success could translate to political success, arguing that "the state's business is just business like everyday business. Any business must be put on a business plan, and so must a state government. It's got to be run business-like."<sup>129</sup> Acuff emphasized his independence of political organizations and machines, explaining, "I haven't asked for help in any way. I'm as free of any machine as anyone ever was. There's absolutely no string whatsoever on me, not one."<sup>130</sup> Acuff was confident in his ability to win without the backing of a

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

political machine “because there’s not a man in the state who has any more friends than I have and friends mean a lot more than any political machine.”<sup>131</sup> Acuff believed he could win, and he began to premise his candidacy on opposition to the Crump machine and political independence from political organizations in general. His treatment of the issues, from explaining his position on issues where he did take a position, to withholding judgment on issues he had not studied, indicates the seriousness of his consideration.

While the reporters at the *Tennessean* who nominated Acuff against his knowledge were inspired to do so by Governor Cooper’s treatment of the *Opry*, Acuff did not run in defense of country music. Instead, he told reporters that “if the public felt that me being a hillbilly entertainer was a slur on the state, I wouldn’t want to run.”<sup>132</sup> Rather, his impetus for running was a sense of duty to the people who were interested in his candidacy -- “[a]s for running, I’m leaving it more or less to my friends, and how things turn, how anxious people are for me to run. If I feel that I can better Tennessee, I’ll make the races. If not, I wouldn’t want to run.”<sup>133</sup>

Leaving his political fate in the hands of his supporters extended to his political affiliation. He did not understand why Democrats had petitioned for his candidacy, given that his family had always been Republican, but he still seemed willing to run as a

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*



Democrat if popular sentiment dictated it.<sup>134</sup> Acuff's willingness to run as a Democrat despite his Republican heritage begs the question of what the major differences were between the Democratic and Republican Parties in Tennessee, especially as Southern Democrats in Congress were increasingly working with Northern Republicans to tank New Deal legislation that was seen as too hostile to business or too friendly to labor.<sup>135</sup> While ostensibly in support of civil rights, Republicans in Congress were content to leave the filibuster in place, allowing Southern Democrats to effectively veto civil rights legislation in exchange for support in sidelining legislation they saw as too pro-labor or anti-business.<sup>136</sup> In the South, meanwhile, a faction of white supremacist "lily-white" Republicans were actively struggling against the traditional biracial "black-and-tan" faction for party dominance.<sup>137</sup> Seeing catering to the disenfranchised African American electorate as a liability in the Jim Crow South, lily-white Republicans argued that the only way to expand their share of the vote was to cater to the white Southerners who could vote.<sup>138</sup> In Tennessee, where African American voting rights were not as restricted, Republican centers of power were split between the black-and-tan western part of the state and the lily-white east.<sup>139</sup> Political scientists Heersink and Jenkins

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Katznelson, 16; *Black and Black*, 54.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Heersink and Jenkins, 13.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

maintain that the east, lacking a significant African American population, was almost lily-white by default.<sup>140</sup> They imply that although eastern Republicans did occasionally use white supremacist language on the campaign trail to counter Democratic race-baiting, their willingness to share federal patronage with the black-and-tan west and resist efforts to disenfranchise African Americans marked them as less white supremacist than other lily-white factions in the South.<sup>141</sup> Whatever the case may have been, eastern Republicans were not poised to differentiate themselves from Democrats on the issue of civil rights, and they also shared similar conservative views on business, taxation, and labor.

The only area where Southern Republicans meaningfully differed with Southern Democrats, then, seemed to be in their opposition to New Deal spending, which was popular among the Southern electorate. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that most Southerners rejected a Republican Party that only meaningfully differed from the Democratic Party in opposing spending they supported. The Republican Party's branding as the party of Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Great Depression in the South, and its inability to offer the advantages of incumbency in Congress that Southern Democratic politicians offered their constituents, also harmed their prospects in the South.<sup>142</sup> For his part, although Acuff later expressed opposition to the New Deal, Roosevelt, and Truman, he was supportive of the Tennessee Valley Authority, one of the

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 290-291.

<sup>142</sup> Black and Black, 49.

most visible symbols of the New Deal in the region.<sup>143</sup> In his 1948 Republican gubernatorial run, he would also express support for old-age pensions to supplement Social Security and free textbooks for children, indicating that he was not ideologically opposed to government spending.<sup>144</sup> If Acuff was not completely opposed to the idea of public spending, which was the main point of contention between Southern Democrats and Republicans, perhaps he entertained the idea of running as a Democrat because his views would have been almost equally if not more at home in the Democratic Party. Also, he may have been aware that running as a Democrat would have given him the best chance to actually become governor, considering the general hostility of the Tennessee political terrain towards Republican candidates and the previous two decades of Republican irrelevance and in statewide contests. Those odds would be even more difficult to overcome in a wartime presidential election year in which a popular incumbent Democrat was running for reelection.

While Acuff's honesty about what he did not know about politics was refreshing to some voters, others were unimpressed by "his rank ignorance in state affairs."<sup>145</sup> In one letter to the editor, "A VOTER" from Nashville, identified as "no Crump follower or lover, but neither ... a Roy Acuff fan," chafed at the revelation that Acuff had not voted since he had moved to Nashville six years earlier, writing that "[Acuff] evidently hasn't

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<sup>143</sup> Schlappi, 191.

<sup>144</sup> La Chapelle, 104, 111.

<sup>145</sup> J.A. Daugherty, "Test Might Spoil," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 1, 1944,

been very interested in politics or the welfare of our state government ... I can't help but think he'd be very inefficient."<sup>146</sup> Still, he conceded that "[m]any, many people, especially in the rural sections, would vote for him because he's their favorite fiddler or singer of heart songs."<sup>147</sup> He also questioned why Acuff would give up his money for a governor's salary.<sup>148</sup>

By mid-January, Acuff was receiving triple his usual fan mail, with supporters assuring him that he was the man to beat the Crump organization.<sup>149</sup> Believing he could do it, he stated that if he were governor, "Mr. Crump would be welcome in my office any time, but he would come on the same level as the most humble citizen of my native Union County."<sup>150</sup> He reiterated several of the policy positions, including his resentment of the poll tax while adding his support for old age pensions, providing jobs for soldiers in postwar planning, and leaving political affiliation out of selections for state appointments.<sup>151</sup> He also upheld the Bible and the Golden Rule as models of governance: "if a great revival of old time religion would sweep over this country, it

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<sup>146</sup> "Acuff Lashes Poll Tax," *The Nashville Tennessean*; "About Roy Acuff," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 13, 1943, 8.

<sup>147</sup> "About Roy Acuff," *The Nashville Tennessean*.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Elmer Hinton, "'Big Joke' Primary Qualification No Joke Now; Fan Mail Triples," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 9, 1944, 1.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

would solve many of our problems.”<sup>152</sup> As to whether he would actually run in 1944, Acuff “said that his friends would make the final decision whether he would run for governor or not.”<sup>153</sup> While he appreciated that serving as governor would be a high honor, “I would not feel personally elevated to be called governor.”<sup>154</sup> For Acuff, running for governor was about doing “my best to help the people of my native state and the common people from whom I came and am a part of.”<sup>155</sup>

On January 23, 1944, “Boss” E.H. Crump finally weighed in, stating “I can’t believe something unbelievable, that the people of Tennessee want a man for governor that knows nothing whatsoever about governmental affairs.”<sup>156</sup> Referring to the success of Jimmie Davis, Crump continued, “There have been many singing and yodeling men elected to public office—and some were good singers.”<sup>157</sup> Davis was “no patent medicine artist ... he has real ability and is a great speaker,” an apparent swipe at Acuff, who “he had never heard” perform and did not know.<sup>158</sup> Crump’s reference to Davis, who had just entered the gubernatorial runoff in Louisiana, and his disparagement of

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> “Crump Doubts Acuff’s Chances; Fiddler Says Can Get Job Done,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 23, 1944, 1.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

Acuff, exposed an apprehensiveness about a Democratic primary candidate he could not control, and whose fame would likely deliver many votes. Jimmie Davis's success at taking on the "Maestri-bossed Louisiana machine" made Crump nervous at the prospect of an Acuff candidacy, as did Pappy O'Daniel's success in winning the Texas gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races.<sup>159</sup> Crump, who himself had turned to blues musicians such as W.C. Handy for entertainment at his own rallies, was also aware of the power of music as a campaign tool.<sup>160</sup> He also knew that hillbilly candidates could upend political machines, and he did not want his machine to be the next casualty.

The political winds at Acuff's back were not only due to the success of other hillbilly performers in politics, but also because of the Crump machine's increasing unpopularity. Writing to the *Tennessean* two days later, a reader identifying only as "An East Tennessean" explained that, as a traveling man, that "cover[s] the state fairly well," he had "never before ... seen such wide resentment toward the Crump machine," affirming that "Yes, Mr. Acuff can be elected" and predicting that "he might carry all but three counties."<sup>161</sup> The political editor agreed, arguing that "the Acuff candidacy has the boys [of the Crump machine] sweating already," pointing out that "otherwise the

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<sup>159</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Mention of Louisiana—and Roy Acuff—Makes Boys Riding With Crump Political Machine Jump and Jump," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 23, 1944, 1.

<sup>160</sup> La Chapelle, 115.

<sup>161</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Democratic National Committee Finds Southern Revolt Absent, Indorses Roosevelt Leadership," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 25, 1944, 8.

Memphis boss would have made no references so directly aimed at Acuff,” and maintaining that “what the Boss doesn’t seem to, or perhaps want to, recognize is the complete unpopularity of his present puppet regime, or the numbers who comment: ‘Well, any change must be for the better.’”<sup>162</sup> It is difficult to gauge how widespread this resentment of the Crump machine was, or whether the anti-Crump *Tennessean* was simply platforming the views with which it agreed the most. In general, the Crump faction was more conservative and backed by business interests, while some anti-machine Democrats were more strongly in favor of the New Deal, but the division seemed less ideological and more premised on hostility towards Crump’s perceived control of the state.<sup>163</sup> Some constituents simply resented the idea of Crump exercising such unilateral control over state government,

Responding to Crump’s allegations that he knew nothing of governance, Acuff commented that “running the government of Tennessee is not a one man job.”<sup>164</sup> He would choose “men who are honest and wholly competent to conduct the affairs of the different governmental departments.”<sup>165</sup> Instead of allowing Crump to use his inexperience against him, Acuff owned up to it and expressed his confidence to do a good job in spite of it. By being honest about his inexperience, as well as premising his potential candidacy on religious principles, Acuff set himself up as a moral alternative to

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Grantham, 218.

<sup>164</sup> “Crump Doubts,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, 10.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Crump's corrupt machine. Acuff maintained, "I don't know so much about state government, but I do know that the Ten Commandments work just as well in Democratic government as they do in religion."<sup>166</sup> Some citizens agreed "that perhaps a good, courageous, honest man without experience might become a great governor."<sup>167</sup> *Tennessean* political columnist Joe Hatcher, meanwhile, made the point that Prentice Cooper had inaugurated at least six executive assistants and had spent unprecedented amounts of time away from the office himself to demonstrate that the governor delegating authority was not unprecedented.<sup>168</sup> He also invoked Acuff's financial success in summarizing the sentiment of average citizens discussing the potential candidacy, writing that "A good business executive is one who chooses his aides wisely and well, and leaves the responsibility of their jobs to them," and ended with a dig at the Crump machine, writing that "the state has been operating by 'remote control at one time or another ... [i]t doesn't necessarily have to be from Memphis all the time."<sup>169</sup> The public was ready to vote for Acuff despite his inexperience.

By January 30<sup>th</sup>, Acuff's "star was unquestionably in ascendency," the editorial board of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* riffed on Crump's disparagement of Acuff, commenting that they also "found something hard to believe ... that the people of

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<sup>166</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Possible Acuff 'Governorship by Remote Control' Would Be No Innovation for State After All," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 26, 1944, 1, 7.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. The Crump machine was based in Memphis.



Tennessee would want a man as their governor who would dance to whatever tune was played on the boss' [sic] fiddle."<sup>170</sup> The *Putnam County Herald* added "Roy Acuff will be hard to beat or handle if there is anything in the signs of the time and precedents heretofore set."<sup>171</sup> "In our 50 years in politics we have never known one of these fiddlers to be defeated for office if he was at all qualified," citing as examples fiddler-politicians Bob Taylor, Uncle Alf Taylor, and Albert Gore.<sup>172</sup> Where these politicians used their amateur fiddle skills to attract votes, Acuff would be the first professional musician to do so. Again, the recent success of fiddling candidates, along with resentment of Crump's domination of Tennessee Democratic politics, seemed to be the perfect combination to propel Acuff to the governorship, should Acuff enter the Democratic primary.

Still, by February 7<sup>th</sup>, hopes that Acuff might enter the primary began to deflate. His friends believed he had already made up his mind not to run since "He was qualified as a candidate without his knowledge, and already had commitments to make a movie in Hollywood this spring and other contracts for appearances which would not permit

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<sup>170</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Taylor Out of Gubernatorial Picture With Carmack A 'Probable'—Roy Acuff's Star Soars During Week," *The Memphis Tennessean*, January 30, 1944, 14.

<sup>171</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Taylor Out of Gubernatorial Picture With Carmack A 'Probable'—Roy Acuff's Star Soars During Week," *The Memphis Tennessean*, January 30, 1944, 14.

<sup>172</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Taylor Out of Gubernatorial Picture With Carmack A 'Probable'—Roy Acuff's Star Soars During Week," *The Memphis Tennessean*, January 30, 1944, 14.

him to make an active campaign."<sup>173</sup> Even so, until Acuff made the final announcement, "the entire state political picture for 1944" was "tied into a Gordian knot," given the idea "in professional political circles that 'opposing Acuff is suicide,'" and that "defeat by a hillbilly radio star without governmental experience would mean the complete political demise of any politician, or even a machine as powerful as the Crump force."<sup>174</sup> The Crump machine was concerned that, "with Acuff almost certain to sweep through most sections of the state," even if they did win, the margin would be narrow, and that it would "reflect no credit upon a candidate" who won a closely contested primary against Acuff.<sup>175</sup> The consensus was that "Acuff ... is sitting with the strings in his fingers in control of the entire election picture."<sup>176</sup> Whatever he decided, it seemed, would determine the trajectory of the 1944 Tennessee gubernatorial race.

Despite this momentum, Acuff announced that he would not be a candidate for governor on February 7, 1944.<sup>177</sup> In his withdrawal statement, Acuff indicated that he believed he could best serve the people of Tennessee by providing "entertainment, solace and pleasure" through "the folk music and the ballads which our God-fearing

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<sup>173</sup> Joe Hatcher, "Roy Acuff Believed Already Decided But His Delay On Announcement Keeps Political Picture All Tied Up," 1.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Schlappi, 186.

pioneer ancestors brought here with them in the early years of the nation.”<sup>178</sup> He stated further that he was honored, thankful, and humbled to have been considered, but he did not want “added burdens of conducting a campaign for the office of chief executive of the state” on top of his radio and movie obligations.<sup>179</sup> It may be the case that he was ultimately unwilling to trade his \$200,000 annual earnings for the \$4,000 governor’s salary, or perhaps he legitimately did not want the stress of trying to campaign on top of fulfilling his prior obligations. His biographer maintains that he bristled at the pressure from Democrats who tried to influence him once they determined his candidacy was genuine.<sup>180</sup> In his withdrawal letter, Acuff also stated that he had “been earnestly seeking the guidance and advice of friends.”<sup>181</sup> It may be that in seeking this guidance, it became clear to him that it would be difficult to be as free from factional influence as he would have liked. Whatever the explanation, with Acuff officially out of the race, the Crump machine was no longer paralyzed by Acuff’s possible candidacy. Crump was now free to regain control of the political process. Commentators meanwhile lamented the deflation of the “Acuff boom” which had

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<sup>178</sup> “Not Candidate For Governor, Roy Acuff Says,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 8, 1944, 1.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Schlapi, 186.

<sup>181</sup> “Not Candidate For Governor, Roy Acuff Says,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 8, 1944, 1.

opened space in the Democratic primary for a Crump-picked candidate.<sup>182</sup> When Jimmie Davis finally won in Louisiana, beating the New Orleans-based Huey Long machine controlled by Mayor Bob Maestri, Joe Hatcher of the *Tennessean* again drew comparisons to Acuff, calling it “what might have been a preview of Tennessee’s primaries this summer had Roy Acuff ... continued in the gubernatorial race.”<sup>183</sup>

While the announcement that he would not be considered as a candidate in the Democratic primary may have dashed the hopes of voters excited about a potential Acuff candidacy, it turns out that “just as Acuff was announcing his decision” to not seek office, he was qualified for the GOP primary by a Republican group from Carroll County, potentially keeping the idea of an Acuff candidacy alive.<sup>184</sup> On February 12<sup>th</sup>, Acuff attended “the biggest Lincoln Day gathering in Tennessee history,” in which Alfred M. Landon, the 1936 Republican presidential nominee, announced his candidacy for the 1944 presidential race against Roosevelt, adding fuel to the fire.<sup>185</sup> But Acuff remained silent on the matter. As late as May 28<sup>th</sup>, when Rep. Jim McCord announced his

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<sup>182</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Sudden Deflation of Acuff Boom Throws Field Open To All; Eagle, Chambliss, Gore Among Prominent,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 14, 1944, 1.

<sup>183</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Davis in Louisiana Brings Roy Acuff to Mind; Old Regulars in New Orleans Much Like Crump,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, March 3, 1944, 1.

<sup>184</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Boys Can Go to Back Rooms.”

<sup>185</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Landon Predicts G.O.P. Sweep,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, February 13, 1944, 1.

Democratic candidacy, the *Tennessean* called McCord's victory "a foregone conclusion unless the Republicans can induce fiddle-playing and mountain ballad singing Roy Acuff to oppose him."<sup>186</sup> It seems the same reporters who believed Acuff could break the Crump machine by virtue of his hillbilly fame also found it plausible that Acuff might disrupt the overwhelming Democratic dominance of the Solid South, even despite Democratic prominence on the national stage.

On June 23, 1944, however, Tennessee Republicans suffered the same fate as their anti-Crump Democratic counterparts when Acuff formally announced that he would not enter the GOP primary, either.<sup>187</sup> Where Acuff had seriously considered entering the Democratic primary, he remained silent as the wave of Republican enthusiasm for an Acuff candidacy grew. In his formal declination statement, Acuff noted that the surge of mail urging him to actively run as a Republican made it necessary to issue a statement to put the matter to rest once and for all.<sup>188</sup> He reiterated that he wished to pursue his entertainment career, expressing "hope to bring myself into closer touch with every person of my native state, as well as to add to their entertainment and enjoyment" through music, not politics.<sup>189</sup> The *Tennessean*, again

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<sup>186</sup> "McCord to Open Quarters for Gubernatorial Run," *The Nashville Tennessean*, May 28, 1944, 25.

<sup>187</sup> "Acuff No Candidate In State G.O.P. Race," *The Nashville Tennessean*, June 23, 1944, 16.

<sup>188</sup> Schlappi, 187.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

assuming the political viability of hillbilly performers, maintained that “Acuff, strangely as seems, could make it tough on any man in any state-wide race he might see fit to enter.”<sup>190</sup> Crump-sponsored Democratic gubernatorial candidate Jim Nance McCord nonetheless easily defeated Republican John Wesley Kilgo by a large margin.<sup>191</sup> While Republicans performed a bit better than they expected, they still only won about a third of the votes cast.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Joe Hatcher, “Politics,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, June 25, 1944.

<sup>191</sup> “F.D.R. Wins Fourth Term,” *The Nashville Tennessean*, November 8, 1944, 1.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

Four years later, in 1948, Acuff tested the idea of running as a Republican. After announcing that he would mount a serious campaign if nominated as the Republican gubernatorial candidate, Acuff was qualified for the Republican primary, again without his knowledge, but this time with his general consent.<sup>193</sup> This time he remained in the race, beating his closest challenger by a 4-1 margin, despite being unable to campaign during the primary due to filmmaking commitments.<sup>194</sup> We cannot know how he would have fared in the 1944 Democratic primary, but his overwhelming Republican primary victory in spite of his refusal to actively campaign seems to suggest that his hillbilly fame would have been a significant advantage.

In the general election, he ran on many of the same policy positions that he had outlined during his consideration of a Democratic candidacy – support for old-age pensions, veteran’s benefits, and free textbooks for school children, and opposition to the poll tax and machine politics.<sup>195</sup> His platform as a Republican was also very similar to the ones that led to the O’Daniel and Davis machine-breaking victories in Texas and

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<sup>193</sup> Schlappi, 188.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Pareles, “Roy Acuff.” La Chapelle, 100; 110-115.

Louisiana, as Peter La Chapelle emphasizes.<sup>196</sup> Basing his candidacy on the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments, he campaigned hard, barnstorming through Tennessee with his band and holding nearly 50 campaign rallies in 62 days from August 30<sup>th</sup> through November 1<sup>st</sup>, returning to Nashville on Saturdays for his regularly scheduled *Opry* performances.<sup>197</sup> Although Acuff managed to gather some of the biggest political crowds ever assembled in Tennessee, they would start to dwindle if his political speeches lasted longer than fifteen minutes, implying that many spectators were more interested in seeing Roy Acuff the musician than Roy Acuff the candidate.<sup>198</sup> It was unclear whether the size of his crowds would translate to political success. While Acuff's main draw on the campaign trail was his music, after his initial discussion of the campaign on air at the *Opry*, he promised "not to bring politics again to the *Grand Ole Opry*."<sup>199</sup> Acuff was fine augmenting politics with music, but he was not willing to taint his music with politics, perhaps a sign of which he held more sacred.

Roy Acuff ultimately failed to become the first Republican governor of a Southern state since 1920, even though he won the most votes for a Republican candidate in that time period in Tennessee.<sup>200</sup> Part of this loss may be attributed to the fact that he did not run against Crump's preferred candidate in the general election. His

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<sup>196</sup> La Chapelle, 100-113.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*; Schlappi, 191.

<sup>198</sup> Schlappi, 191-193.

<sup>199</sup> Schlappi, 189

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 204; La Chapelle, 100.



opponent, Gordon Browning, won the Democratic primary in an upset over the Crump machine, and was, like Acuff, critical of machine politics, which perhaps cost Acuff anti-machine votes he might have earned had he run against a Crump candidate in the general election.<sup>201</sup> It seems likely, however, that this only affected the margin, not the outcome. Acuff's most significant hurdle was undoubtedly his party affiliation. Although Acuff's policy preferences emulated the winning platforms of O'Daniel and Davis, their packaging under the auspices of Republicanism likely discouraged Southern Democrats from breaking rank and voting outside of their usual party affiliation. Once again, if Southern voters could get similar policies from Democratic politicians without the association with the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Great Depression, it makes sense that they would prefer to stay within the Democratic fold. Browning's shared opposition of machine politics would have also eliminated another way in which Acuff could have differentiated himself. As a Republican moderate supportive of the TVA, he would have also had a differentiation problem, but even if he had opposed the TVA, like his political companion, Republican Senate candidate Carroll Reece, he would not have found a majority of voters in Tennessee willing to back his opposition.<sup>202</sup> This points to the ultimate problem for Republicans in the South during this era: the electorate generally opposed the ways in which Republicans were willing to differentiate themselves from Southern Democrats, and thus punished them politically for differentiation, but it would also choose Democrats in cases where Republican policies

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<sup>201</sup> La Chapelle, 100; Schlappi, 188.

<sup>202</sup> Schlappi, 191.

were too similar.<sup>203</sup> Although Roy Acuff was buoyed by his massive national fame, which was likely the reason his vote tally served as the high water mark for a Republican gubernatorial candidate in Tennessee in this time period, even he could not overcome this “heads you win, tails I lose” dynamic.

Acuff later stated that he thought he would have won had he run as a Democrat, hinting that he understood that the political geography of Tennessee made winning as a Republican unlikely.<sup>204</sup> One question this raises is why Acuff declined to run as a Democrat in 1944 but decided to run as a Republican in 1948, even going so far as to court the candidacy by making a statement that he would run if nominated. This is especially baffling in light of the fact that, during the democratic primary, Acuff indicated that he hoped the anti-Crump candidate Gordon Browning would not only defeat the Crump-backed incumbent Jim McCord, but also become the next governor, adding “if Browning wins and I have to criticize him, I’ll withdraw. Gordon Browning is my friend.”<sup>205</sup> Although Acuff stayed in the race when Browning won the primary, he refused to directly criticize Browning, even as Browning began needling him about his political qualifications later in the race.<sup>206</sup> Acuff even indicated that, if elected, he would appoint a bipartisan cabinet.<sup>207</sup> If Acuff was not particularly opposed to Democratic

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<sup>203</sup> Key, 80.

<sup>204</sup> Schlappi, 204.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 198.

control, or a Democratic cabinet, it's worth considering why he would not simply run as a Democrat, or why he would contest Democratic rule through a Republican campaign at all.

It may be reasonable to conclude that Acuff declined to run as a Democrat in 1944, at the height of his fame, because he was likely to win and did not want to slow his lucrative career. Conversely, he may have decided to run in 1948 because his career could use a jumpstart and running as a Republican would put him in no danger of winning. His biographer notes that, after leaving the *Opry* for a year in 1946, his fame waned, but he was still massively popular.<sup>208</sup> Perhaps he saw the campaign as a way to step back into the spotlight. Acuff, however, chafed at the suggestion that he was running for the publicity, saying "I don't need advertising badly enough to get into this campaign, travel from one end of the state to the other several times, visit every county in the state, and hold nearly 100 meetings.... You can buy advertising and pay for it easier than that."<sup>209</sup>

Instead, he framed his desire to run as a genuine desire to serve the public, stating that "I'm in it because the people of Tennessee have been mighty good to me, and if I can serve them in return, I will be happy to do it."<sup>210</sup> In his Republican nomination acceptance speech, Acuff echoed this sentiment, asserting that "a man also has an *obligation* to serve his fellow man if he can; and so many people were asking me

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-54.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

to run and they were so sincere and so earnest in it, that I decided I didn't have the right to ... refuse to run."<sup>211</sup> Of course, Acuff's potential candidacy in 1944 was met with similar enthusiasm and he still declined to run, and in 1948 he demonstrated that he could, in fact, juggle his duties as an entertainer and a campaigner after citing the burden of campaigning on top of his performance obligations as a reason for not entering the 1944 primary. The amount of enthusiasm for an Acuff candidacy in 1944 and 1948 do not seem sufficiently different to make self-evident a satisfactory explanation for why he declined to run in 1944 and decided to run in 1948, but the difference in party affiliation, and the corresponding likelihoods of winning, seem to suggest that Acuff simply did not want to be governor. To be fair, though, he also declined to run as a Republican in 1944, which complicates the idea that Acuff did not want to win. In light of that, the simplest explanation may be that the 1944 qualifications, which were thrust upon him without warning, caught him off guard, and he found himself unprepared to take on so big a commitment so suddenly. Perhaps he felt more prepared to run four years later, having had more time to actually consider a candidacy, and legitimately felt compelled to serve his fellow citizens.

Also, while it seems plausible that Acuff declined a Democratic candidacy because he might have won, and engaged in a Republican one because he was unlikely to win, another explanation might be that his East Tennessee Republican heritage was the deciding factor in both cases. In other words, it may simply be the case that he did not want to run as a Democrat because he was a lifelong Republican, and that he

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

wanted to run as a Republican for the same reason. As he said during the campaign, “[m]y father and all of my people were Republicans ... I have remained a Republican all my life ... I believe in the two party system of government; and further believe that when I vote in a Republican primary, that it is my duty to support the Republican nominee.”<sup>212</sup> Even if Acuff understood that he was unlikely to win as a Republican, he may have felt obligated to support the party by attempting to capitalize on his hillbilly fame on their behalf.

While the limited degrees of difference in policy preferences may make it difficult for a modern observer to understand why party affiliation mattered in Tennessee in the 1940s, the division of the state between East Tennessee Republicans and Democrats suggests that it did. V.O. Key, Jr. asserted that party loyalties forged during and after the Civil War would not be so easily discarded, writing that “[s]ocial mechanisms for the transmission and perpetuation of partisan faiths have an effectiveness far more potent than the political issue of the day.”<sup>213</sup> Given that East Tennessee remained Republican through different eras of progressive and conservative control of the national party, there is no reason to assume that Republicans there would be any more willing to reject their partisan loyalty at a moment of convergence with Democrats than at any other time. There is also no reason to assume that East Tennessee Republicans would be any more willing than Southern Democrats to set aside the legacy of the Civil War to place policy preferences over party loyalty. Given that

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<sup>212</sup> Schlappi, 207.

<sup>213</sup> Key, 76.

Southern Democrats, angered by national Democratic support for civil rights, ultimately made the transition to the Republican Party, and not the other way around, it may be the case that the partisan loyalties of Southern Republicans forged by the Civil War were ultimately stronger than those of Southern Democrats.

After losing on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1948, Acuff and his Smoky Mountain Boys were off to Hollywood to film *Home in San Antone*.<sup>214</sup> With that, Roy Acuff's political career was over. He returned to his lucrative career as a performer, actor, recording star, publisher, and leading figure of the *Grand Ole Opry*. Over the next few decades, his political involvement would be limited to supporting Republican presidential candidates Dwight D. Eisenhower, Barry Goldwater, and Richard Nixon, maintaining support for the Republican Party even after its seemingly more conservative turn following the nomination of Goldwater in 1964.<sup>215</sup> At face value, it might seem odd that a Southern Republican like Roy Acuff could support the Republican Party both before and after the national partisan realignment that followed the nomination of Goldwater and the election of Nixon. While it seems logical to assume that something significant must have changed within the GOP for Southern Democrats to go from treating Republicans with animosity to joining them – and surely Goldwater and Nixon did usher in changes to the party – someone like Roy Acuff reminds us that there are potentially more continuities between the pre- and post-realignment Republican Parties than we might be inclined to think. If lily-white Republicans in the South only substantively differed

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<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>215</sup> La Chapelle, 117.

with Southern Democrats on the issue of federal spending, there's no reason to assume that a realignment that precipitated Southern Democratic migration to the Republican Party would have necessarily pushed Southern Republicans out of the party. Thus, there is no reason to assume that this realignment would have pushed out Roy Acuff.

From Bob Taylor to Merle Haggard to Toby Keith to the Dixie Chicks, the question of whether or not country music is a conservative genre, a populist genre, or something else has remained a salient topic among fans, detractors, and political observers for about as long as country music has intersected with politics. In light of this, it is interesting to consider for a moment what the case study of Roy Acuff's experience with gubernatorial politics might add to this debate. While it might be easy to say it affirms the thesis that country music is conservative, since Roy Acuff was indeed conservative, the fact that he resisted cooption by the *other* conservative party in the South seems to suggest something other than a reflexive or latent conservatism. Despite a more viable path to power via the Democratic Party, Roy Acuff chose to stay true to his East Tennessee Republican heritage. If this suggests anything about an inherent political nature of country music, it may simply be that country artists bring their politics to the genre, as opposed to genre dictating their politics. Of course, if this is true, and if Bill Malone's "Southern thesis" holds water, it is perhaps not surprising that a genre practiced predominantly by Southerners would also largely reflect the dominant political proclivities of the region, and therefore occupy the collective American imagination as a genre associated with conservatism. But this idea also leaves room for political nonconformists like Glen Taylor, the Dixie Chicks, and Roy Acuff to be a part of the political tapestry of country music. While these artists and others like them

did not share the politics of the majority of their counterparts within the genre, their presence as essential parts of the story of country music helps us move beyond a narrow conception of what the genre can mean, politically.



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