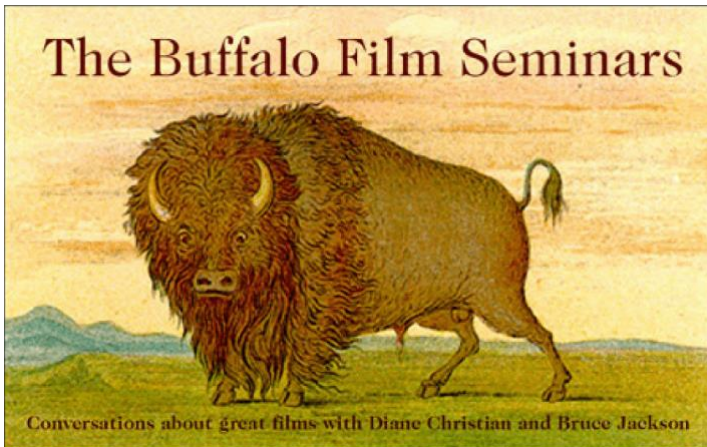


April 27, 2021 (42:13)

Joel and Ethan Coen : O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? (2000,109 min)

*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.  
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Vimeo link for our introduction to \*O Brother, Where Art Thou?\*](#)

[Zoom link for all Spring 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:](#)

Meeting ID: 925 3527 4384 Passcode: 820766

**Produced, Written, and Directed by** Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, loosely adapted the screenplay from Homer's *The Odyssey*

**Music by** T Bone Burnett

**Cinematography by** Roger Deakins

**Film Editing by** Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (as Roderick Jaynes) and Tricia Cooke

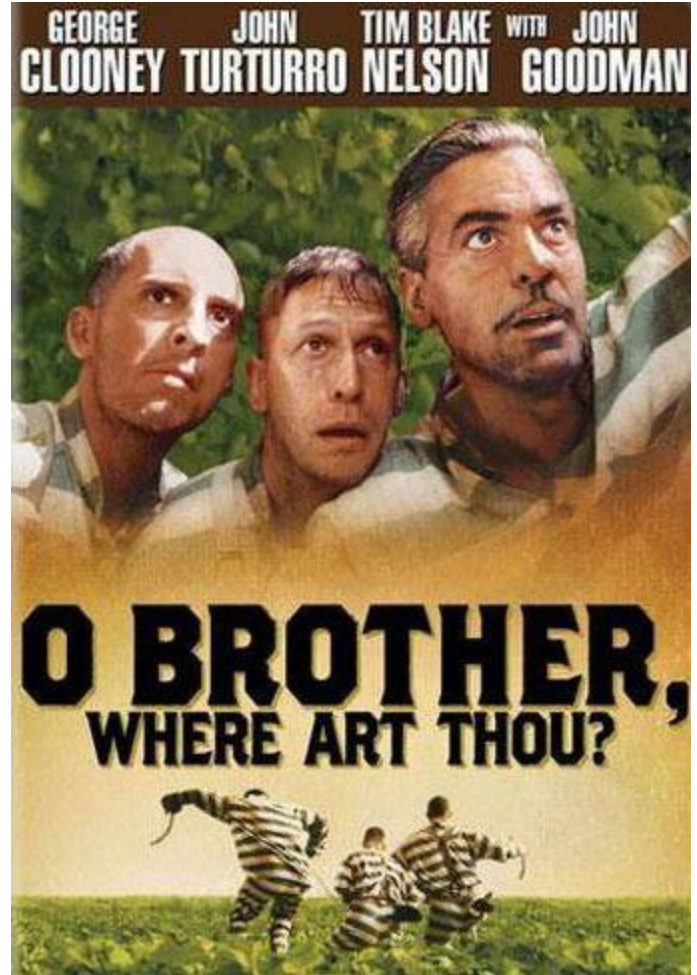
The film was selected into the main competition of the 2000 Cannes Film Festival. The film also received two Academy Award nominations at the 73rd Academy Awards in 2001: Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Cinematography.

#### **Cast**

George Clooney...Ulysses Everett McGill.

John Turturro...Pete

Tim Blake Nelson...Delmar O'Donnell



Chris Thomas King...Tommy Johnson, a skilled blues musician.

Frank Collison...Washington Bartholomew "Wash" Hogwallop

John Goodman...Daniel "Big Dan" Teague, a one-eyed Bible salesman.

Holly Hunter...Penny Wharvey-McGill, Everett's ex-wife.

Charles Durning...Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel, the governor of Mississippi.

Daniel von Barga...Sheriff Cooley

Wayne Duvall...Homer Stokes, a candidate for governor.

Ray McKinnon...Vernon T. Waldrip.

Michael Badalucco...Baby Face Nelson.

Stephen Root...Mr. Lund, a blind radio station manager.

Lee Weaver...the Blind Seer, who accurately predicts the outcome of the trio's adventure.

Mia Tate, Musetta Vander and Christy Taylor...the three "Sirens".

Gillian Welch...record store customer asking for a copy of the Soggy Bottom Boys' record.



**Joel and Ethan Coen** (b. Joel Daniel Coen, November 29, 1954; Ethan Jesse Coen, September 21, 1957 in Minneapolis, Minnesota) have won 4 Academy Awards: 1997 Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen for *Fargo* (1996), 2008 Best Motion Picture of the Year for *No Country for Old Men* (2007), which they shared with Scott Rudin; 2008 Best Achievement in Directing for *No Country for Old Men* (2007); and 2008 Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay for *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Joel has 24 producer credits, 33 writing credits, 26 director credits, and 15 editing credits. Ethan has 24 producer credits, 37 writer credits, 23 director credits, and 15 editor credits. The two usually edit under the name "Roderick Jaynes." Some of their films are 2018 *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, 2013 *Inside Llewyn Davis*, 2010 *True Grit*, 2009 *A Serious Man*, 2008 *Burn After Reading*, 2007 *No Country for Old Men*, 2004 *The Ladykillers*, 2003 *Intolerable Cruelty*, 2001 *The Man Who Wasn't There*, 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, 1998 *The Big Lebowski*, 1996 *Fargo*, 1994 *The Hudsucker Proxy*, 1991 *Barton Fink*, 1990 *Miller's Crossing*, 1987 *Raising Arizona*, and 1984 *Blood Simple*.

**Roger Deakins** (b. May 24, 1949 in Torquay, Devon, England) has been the cinematographer for 87 films and television shows, including *Empire of Light* (announced), 2019 *1917*, 2019 *The Goldfinch*, 2017 *Blade Runner 2049*, 2016 *Hail, Caesar!*, 2013

*Prisoners*, 2012 *Skyfall*, 2010 *True Grit*, 2010 *The Company Men*, 2009 *A Serious Man*, 2008 *Revolutionary Road*, 2008 *The Reader*, 2008 *Doubt*, 2007 *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, 2007 *In the Valley of Elah*, 2007 *No Country for Old Men*, 2005 *Jarhead*, 2004 *The Ladykillers*, 2003 *House of Sand and Fog*, 2003 *Intolerable Cruelty*, 2001 *A Beautiful Mind*, 2001 *The Man Who Wasn't There*, 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, 1998 *The Big Lebowski*, 1997 *Kundun*, 1996 *Fargo*, 1995 *Dead Man Walking*, 1994 *The Shawshank Redemption*, 1994 *The Hudsucker Proxy*, 1993 *The Secret Garden*, 1992 *Thunderheart*, 1991 *Barton Fink*, 1991 *Homicide*, 1990 *Air America*, 1988 *Pascali's Island*, 1987 *White Mischiefs*, 1986 *Sid and Nancy*, 1984 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1983 *Another Time, Another Place*, 1980 *Van Morrison in Ireland* (Documentary), 1980 *Blue Suede Shoes* (Documentary), 1977 *Marquis de Sade's Justine*, and 1975 *Mothers Own* (Documentary short).

**Tricia Cooke** (b. June 25, 1965) is an American film editor who is married to American film director, producer, screenwriter, and editor Ethan Coen. They live in New York City. She worked on many of Joel and Ethan Coen's films from 1990's *Miller's Crossing* to *The Man Who Wasn't There* in 2001. She has also edited films such as *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005), and, most recently, *Wanderland* (2018).

**Joseph Henry "T Bone" Burnett III** (b. January 14, 1948, St. Louis, MO) is an American record producer, musician, and songwriter. Burnett rose to fame as a guitarist in Bob Dylan's band during the 1970s. He has received multiple Grammy awards for his work in film music, including for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Cold Mountain* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005), and *Crazy Heart* (2010); and won another Grammy for producing the studio album *Raising Sand* (2007), in which he united the contemporary bluegrass of Alison Krauss with the blues rock of Robert Plant. Burnett helped start the careers of Counting Crows, Los Lobos, Sam Phillips, and Gillian Welch. He produced music for the television programs *Nashville* and *True Detective*. He has released several solo albums, including *Tooth of Crime*, which he wrote for a revival of the play by Sam Shepard.

**George Clooney** (b. 6 May 1961, Lexington, KY) gained wide recognition on the television drama *ER*



from 1994 to 1999. While working on *ER*, he began attracting a variety of leading roles in films, with his breakthrough role in *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996) and *Out of Sight* (1998), in which he first worked with director Steven Soderbergh, who would become a

long-time collaborator. In 1999, he took the lead role in *Three Kings*. After leaving *ER*, Clooney starred in *The Perfect Storm* (2000) and *O Brother, Where Art*



*Thou?* (2000). In 2001, he teamed up with Soderbergh again for the heist comedy *Ocean's Eleven*. In 2001, Clooney and Soderbergh co-founded Section Eight Productions. Clooney made his directorial debut in the 2002 film *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, based on the autobiography of TV producer Chuck Barris. At the 2006 Academy Awards, Clooney was nominated for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay for *Good Night, and Good Luck*, as well as Best Supporting Actor for *Syriana*, which he won. In 2008, Clooney was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor for *Michael Clayton* (2007). He has also acted in films such as *Burn After Reading* (2008), *Up in the Air* (2009), *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009), *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), *The Monuments Men* (2014), *A Very Murray Christmas* (2015, TV special), *Tomorrowland* (2015), *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), *The Midnight Sky* (2020).

**John Turturro** (b. 28 February 1957, Brooklyn, NY) won Best Actor at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival for *Barton Fink*. His directorial effort *Illuminata* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1998. He has acted in 115 films and television series, including, *The Batman* (post-production), *The Plot Against America* (TV Series, 2020), *The Good Shepherd* (2006), *Romance & Cigarettes* (2005), *She Hate Me* (2004), *Secret Window* (2004), *Secret Passage* (2004), *Collateral Damage* (2002), *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing* (2001), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), *Rounders* (1998), *He Got Game* (1998), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *Girl*

*6* (1996), *Clockers* (1995), *Quiz Show* (1994), *Mac* (1992), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Barton Fink* (1991), *State of Grace* (1990), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *The Sicilian* (1987), *The Color of Money* (1986), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *Raging Bull* (1980).

**Holly Hunter** (b. 20 March 1958, Conyers, Georgia)

has acted in 65 films and TV series. She won an Academy Award in 1994 for her performance in *The Piano*. Some of her recent appearances have been on the acclaimed HBO series *Succession* (2018-2019) and *The Big Sick* (2017). Some of her other performances have been in *The Big White* (2005), *Thirteen* (2003), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Crash* (1996), *The Firm* (1993), *The Piano* (1993), *Always* (1989), *Broadcast News* (1987), *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Swing Shift* (1984), and *The Burning* (1981).

**John Goodman** (b. June 20, 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri) played Dan Conner on the ABC television series *Roseanne* (1988–1997). He is a regular collaborator with the Coen brothers on such films as *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Barton Fink* (1991), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), and *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013). His other film performances include lead roles in *Always* (1989), *King Ralph* (1991), *The Babe* (1992), *The Flintstones* (1994), *Blues Brothers 2000* (1998), and *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016), and supporting roles in *True Stories* (1986), *Beyond the Sea* (2004), *Evan Almighty* (2007), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2011), *The Artist* (2011), *Argo* (2012), *Flight* (2012), *Trouble with the Curve* (2012), *The Monuments Men* (2014), *Trumbo* (2015), *Patriots Day* (2016), and *Atomic Blonde* (2017). On television, Goodman has had regular roles in series such as HBO's *Treme* (2010–2011) and has been a frequent host of *Saturday Night Live*, as well as playing guest roles on series such as

*Community*. He currently stars in the HBO comedy *The Righteous Gemstones* (2019–present).



**Paul Coughlin: “Coen, Joel and Ethan” (*Senses of Cinema*, 2003)**

*The Coens are clever directors who know too much about movies and too little about real life.* —

Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*

The adolescent experiences of the young Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, forced indoors by frigid Minnesota winters, provides a remarkably crystalline metaphor for their later film work. It is easy to imagine the brothers peering out their living-room window to witness the very particular and precise ethnographic detail which would find careful representation in their best received film, *Fargo* (1996), then turning to their television-set to observe a Frank Capra comedy or Preston Sturges farce and discovering moments, characters, narratives and themes which would find illustration in their most mannered and artificial work, *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1993). The Coens have been drawn to two seemingly irresolvable modes of expression: ethnographic regionalism and artificial fabrication. It is between these two extremes that the remainder of their films can be mapped.

Many of the films of the Coen brothers are specific to particular regions and communities—*Blood Simple* (1983) owes much of its character to its Texas setting, *Raising Arizona* (1987) paints a very particular picture of the inhabitants of the American South-West, *The Big Lebowski* (1998) gains much of its absurdist comedy from its depiction of the very absurd Los Angeles community and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) relies on the meticulous recreation of Depression-era Mississippi. Yet, the Coen brothers are just as assured in depicting artificial worlds with antecedents in popular culture. *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), which spins a vast intrigue in an

unnamed town, secures much of its conception from Dashiell Hammett’s novels, *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001) owes its physical and thematic construction more to the universe of *film noir* than its Californian location, and *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a patchwork assembly of Capra settings, Sturges characters and Screwball Comedy tropes. *Barton Fink* (1991) might be described as occupying a midpoint position in such an analytical survey of Joel and Ethan Coen’s films. *Barton Fink* is set in the ‘real’ world of Hollywood—an exquisite conception of an authentic world of pure make-believe, “a society where myth has blurred with reality.” (1)

Ironically, it has been these twin aspects of Joel and Ethan Coen’s work—particularised communities and artificial constructions—which has provided the most potent ammunition for critics. The Coens’ detailed reconstruction of identifiable communities, with all their quirks and eccentricities, has led many critics to accuse them of adopting a lofty superiority to their characters. Yet, when they construct a world with no resemblance to reality they are charged with avoiding moral or ethical expression. Nearly 20 years since they made their debut with the independently financed *Blood Simple*, the Coen brothers remain in critical limbo—considered to be neither serious artists nor commercial achievers.

Joel and Ethan Coen were born in Minnesota to academic parents. The brothers were raised in a typical middle-American, middle-class Jewish household. Their childhood was largely unremarkable and aside from the production of a few super-8 home movies, a future in filmmaking seemed unlikely (Ethan’s book of short stories entitled *Gates Of Eden* contains pseudo-biographical, though ‘fictional’, narratives of the Coens’ upbringing). (2) Joel proceeded to New York University where, in lieu of anything better, he enrolled in a film course. Ethan, on the other hand, ventured to Princeton; choosing Philosophy as his major, he composed a thesis on Wittgenstein. Joel’s film school experience would assist him in landing a number of editing jobs on small budget films, providing him with exposure to film production practices. With this grounding the brothers were motivated to make their own film. With the help of investors from the local Minnesota business community the Coens set about making their first feature length film—*Blood Simple*.

Joel and Ethan wrote, directed and produced the film, a working regime they have maintained thus



far in their career. They also edit most of their movies using the single pseudonym Roderick Jaynes. Though nominally Joel directs and Ethan produces, their duties are said to be shared. Whilst working with the Coens on *The Hudsucker Proxy*, Paul Newman claimed he had “never had two directors...[and]...never worked with two guys who had equal creative authority who didn’t squabble.” (3) That the Coen brothers don’t ‘squabble’ reflects the total control they maintain over their vision from script to screen. Anecdotal reports suggest that actors who skip words (even seemingly insignificant dialogue) in line readings are politely requested to repeat the exercise with complete accuracy. The films of the Coen brothers are also rigorously story-boarded, ensuring the visual conception is affirmed and preserved by the many other creative talents—cinematographers, actors, editors—involved in the production of their films. What becomes apparent in the brothers’ approach to movie-making is a desire to control their films completely.

Despite working across a vast array of generic categories and utilising different thematic approaches it is possible to discern many recurrent motifs and continuing interests in their films. Joel and Ethan Coen’s striking ability to compose brilliant dialogue for their characters is perhaps the most distinguished aspect of their work. The dominant critical approach taken with regard to *Fargo* focused on the attention paid to capturing the specific dialect of the Minnesota community. Peter Körte argues that the attention given to maintaining an authentic language-scheme is less a simple affectation or cute device and more an “expression of a very specific experience and mentality,” supporting the notion that the Coens’ ethnographic project is legitimate. (4)

In their postmodern films, such as *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *Barton Fink*, ethnocentric detail is rejected and replaced by allusions to popular culture. This ties in with the Coen brothers’ rampant application of pre-existing source material in new and ironic ways. It is this element, common in many of

their films, which lends weight to the charge that their films are empty of new ideas or moral positions. Todd McCarthy argues, with respect to *The Hudsucker Proxy*, that “rehashes of old movies, no matter how inspired, are almost by definition synthetic, and the fact is that nearly all the characters are constructs rather than human beings with who the viewer can



connect.” (5) Yet, when the Coens construct ‘human beings’ they are often accused of adopting a mocking tone to them. Devin McKinney suggests *Fargo* is “a fatuous piece of nonsense, a tall cool drink of witless condescension” (6) and

Emanuel Levy claims that the Coens “have always treated their characters with contempt, ruthlessly manipulating and loathing their foolishness.” (7) The fascination with language, the application of postmodern techniques, attention to regionalism and charges of arrogant superiority are the most common themes upon which the work of the Coen brothers is appraised.

Joel and Ethan Coen have worked within the realms of various genres, adopting appropriate methods of realisation to reflect these representational frameworks. The dialogue in their films is a prominent factor in the organisation and maintenance of these generic constructions and in the fulfilment of specific stylistic strategies. *The Hudsucker Proxy*’s synthetic visual design is mirrored by its stylised dialogue, the criminal milieu of *Miller’s Crossing* is characterised by memorably rich gangster jargon, while *Fargo*’s attention to visual realism operates concurrently with the application of an appropriate regional dialect. Barry Sonnenfeld—the director of photography on *Raising Arizona*—suggests that the script has greatest priority to the Coens, arguing that words and structure are more important than any visual concerns. (8) Language operates as a cue to the themes and characters in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen. That they construct dialogue of wonderful inarticulacy, such as the Dude’s (Jeff Bridges) scrambled speeches in *The Big Lebowski* and Carl’s (Steve Buscemi) consistent malapropism in *Fargo*, is not merely a joke at the expense of their characters but

rather the critical interrogation of communication breakdown. The premise of *Blood Simple* evolves upon the protagonists' inability to communicate effectively, their private discourses breeding distrust and confusion that ultimately leads to the tragic consequences at the film's conclusion. James Mottram observes that the

"four main protagonists, although existing in a unified physical world, inhabit a separate mental and emotional space that causes repeated misinterpretations." (9) With *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* the Coens have extended this philosophy of miscommunication to an ailment of society in which inarticulacy is an observable symptom.

The language styles pursued by the characters in these films frequently betray repressed or unconscious desires that expose the value systems of modern cultures. Jeff Evans detects the irony inherent in the dialogue of *Raising Arizona* as stemming in part from a gulf that exists between the florid, loquacious and poetic speech of the characters and their sparse, homely and modest physical reality. (10) H.I. (Nicolas Cage) at one point, describes his and Ed's (Holly Hunter) motor-home existence in the middle of the barren plains of the Arizona desert as "the salad days". *Raising Arizona* is to some extent about a desire to improve one's position; H.I., a confirmed recidivist, wants to marry, work, build a home and start a family. He is after the American dream of prosperity, and in dialogue he has found a way to fabricate a chimera of success, having failed to achieve it in a material sense. The moral of the film will finally suggest that this material success is a charade, and that true happiness and prosperity comes from the modest pursuit of doing the right thing. This emphasis on the absence of meaning in language is an earnest critique of aspects of America's culture; of the views and values, prejudices and hegemonies in these societies. The dialogue in the films of the Coen brothers offers insight into dominant ideologies, endeavoring to examine how language works to maintain certain standards and beliefs.



As "regional independents", Joel and Ethan Coen have spread their film wings right across the extensive lands of the United States. *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* document the South-West, *Barton Fink* and *The Big Lebowski* are each set in Los Angeles and *Fargo* is perhaps the most

prominent film ever to capture the specific culture of Minnesota. The Coens have acquired a reputation for a certain kind of ethnographic expression through the critical exploration of

particular cultures. Mottram maintains that these film locations are never arbitrarily chosen but rather the settings "speak on behalf of the characters; ironically, people who, more often than not, are inextricably linked to their homeland", noting that the "heat of Texas in *Blood Simple* is symbolic of the moral inferno that the characters find themselves in." (11) The use of Texas as a setting for *Blood Simple* coincides with the style and concerns of the film's chief inspiration, James M. Cain. Joyce Carol Oates proposes the moral environment of Cain's novels is such that:

...one understands how barren, how stripped and bizarre this Western landscape has become. It is as if the world extends no farther than the radius of one's desire...To be successful, such narrowly-conceived art must blot out what landscape it cannot cover; hence the blurred surrealistic backgrounds of the successful Cain novels. (12)

With *Blood Simple* Joel and Ethan Coen use Texas to develop a similarly surreal environment, of flat, featureless plains, endless highways and stifling heat.

The Coens' most recent film, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, returns to James Cain as a touchstone, reinventing his fiction through the subversion of its generic and literary conventions. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is set in traditional Cain country—a Californian town named Santa Rosa. But the Coens are less interested here in representing an authentic Californian community and more concerned with manufacturing a stylised *film noir* cosmos swathed in existentialist apathy and passivity. Miller's



*Crossing* is also set in an intensely rhetorical world, every setting seems overly precise and affected, not so much a step back in time, more like a return to familiar representations from the past. Ethan Coen declared that in *Miller's Crossing* “the city’s an anonymous one, the typical ‘corrupted town’ of Hammett novels.” (13) *Fargo*, on the other hand seems to carry with it a documentary authenticity. The film’s prologue—which attests to the veracity of the depicted events—may be a red herring, but it does acknowledge the film’s agenda—the maintenance of a coherent system



of realism. The peculiar snow-capped setting and the equally exotic Scandinavian-inflected dialogue reinforces the particularly provincial nature of the representation. Whereas Minnesota is integral to the design and conception of *Fargo*, Los Angeles is fundamental to *The Big Lebowski*. Josh Levine argues that the Coens populated *The Big Lebowski* with types who could not exist anywhere else but “in the sunny land of complete informality and surreal juxtapositions.” (14) The wandering-intrigue narrative of *The Big Lebowski* is perfectly suited to experiencing the widely diverse and divergent community of Los Angeles, a culture equally receptive to doped-out slackers, right-wing militants, German nihilists, Malibu pornographers and a pederast named Jesus (John Turturro).

*Barton Fink* is also set in Los Angeles but its specific placement in the more particularised culture of Hollywood allows for a more fantastic conception. Joel and Ethan Coen’s interpretation of Hollywood in *Barton Fink* is less a denotative representation and more a symbolic interpretation. The Coens place the eponymous hero Barton (John Turturro) in a living hell when he sells his creative soul to a motion picture studio. *Barton Fink* contains a stimulating mix of accepted history, anecdotal and apocryphal elements and pure fiction. A similar methodology is adopted for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which offers a technically precise and culturally astute recreation of 1930s deep-south America but frames the narrative using Homer’s *The Odyssey*. The mixture of historical

detail with an archetypal fiction narrative is a postmodern paradigm. Yet, neither of these films come close to *The Hudsucker Proxy* for re-imagining the past. With *The Hudsucker Proxy* the Coens eschew all resemblance to reality to produce a remarkably artificial world that owes almost all of its inspiration to old movies.

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen are not

merely constructed from the pieces of other films and references are not drawn solely from the domain of cinema history. The Coens seek to work with well known source

material, extracting the essence of an author’s approach and re-deploying this style within a different and original environment. With *Blood Simple* the Coens endeavor to re-contextualise the basic elements of the James Cain novel. *Blood Simple* owes a notable debt to the style of James Cain, but also to *film noir*, *neo-noir*, the tenets of independent film in the 1980s, the crime genre and the eccentricities of Texas culture. The Coen brothers’ films negotiate the issue of fidelity by furnishing adaptations that reject a linear relationship to *one* model or source text. *Miller’s Crossing* is based loosely on two Dashiell Hammett novels, *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest*, and it also engages in a more general sense with Hammett’s style and themes. *The Big Lebowski* is perhaps more ambitious as the Coens, influenced by Raymond Chandler, fashion a story around the world of a doped out loser and social-league ten-pin bowling. With *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, Joel and Ethan Coen return to James M. Cain. But once again the relationship to their inspiration remains paradoxical. *The Man Who Wasn’t There* is concerned with transgressing many of *film noir*’s most important conventions, summarily problematising its connection to James Cain, a chief inspiration for the entire *noir* movement. The Coens have chosen to exclude all emotion from their protagonist, the monotone Ed (Billy Bob Thornton), to make him as dispassionate and detached as possible, prompting Graham Fuller to categorise the film “anti-*noir*”. (15) Without the crucial elements of

passion, desire and sexuality, *The Man Who Wasn't There* undermines the very genre that frames it.

*Barton Fink* is less a subversion of generic conventions and more an ironic reexamination of history. It is both a critique of the Hollywood system then and now, and a reworking of the myth of the leftist artist in the 1930s. It seems, with *Barton Fink*, the Coens secure great enjoyment in debunking the typical celebration of the common man by exposing the egotistical motives that trump



altruistic intention. The Coens subvert the myth of the suffering playwright with their depiction of Barton Fink as a pompous and self-absorbed author who is out of touch with the very people he claims to write for, and about. The Coen brothers have sought to rework and reevaluate the past by engaging with history in a hyper-critical way. The self-conscious manner of the Coen brothers' films always foregrounds both history's and fiction's textuality.

In the films of the Coen brothers the process of story-telling is often laid open to exposition and demonstration. *Barton Fink* is a Hollywood film set in Hollywood, the hub of American story-telling. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a defiantly referential film that overtly exposes its textual design; the film's narrator, an initial indication of the text's narrativity, stops the film midstream and directly addresses the audience. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* foregrounds the narrative framework of its trajectory in the opening credits when the brothers cite *The Odyssey* as the film's basis. With *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the Coen brothers are highly self-conscious in the manner of their storytelling. Their narrative tools, particularly in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, are often deftly self-reflexive. To insist on exposing the devices of construction immediately cues the viewer to the construction of all texts. Linda Hutcheon identifies a mode of "metacinema" in which the formation process of subjectivity and narrativity has become a staple. (16) And it would appear that the Coen brothers' films befit such a classification. Their use of distancing narrational modes such as voice-over

exposition in *Raising Arizona* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the direct address prologue in *Blood Simple* and *The Big Lebowski*, and the rigid application of generic convention in *Miller's Crossing* are all elements which foreground the construction processes involved.

The films of the Coen brothers display an acute awareness of history and its inscription in the texts of the past and the present. Joel and Ethan Coen do not employ pastiche to resolve a dearth of ideas, they actively

examine the texts they draw from as a means to building a bridge to the past. The Coens deny the usual mythical constructions, they do not invest in traditional frameworks of representation, rather they interrogate those frameworks to examine and expose how they construct meaning. With this process the films of the Coen brothers are diligent in their investigation of history and its ideologies. Carolyn Russell argues that:

*the Coens make films that are highly self-conscious of their relationship to preexisting film forms. Their movies rely upon a base of knowledge, cultural and film historical, that is presumed to be shared between themselves and their viewers. (17)*

This assertion highlights the very important manner by which postmodern representations call upon the reader/viewer to complete the text. The role of memory, reception and intertextuality are crucial to the design in the Coen brothers' films. By engaging the texts of the past the directors are able to challenge and critique history through the agency of parody, irony and self-reflexivity. This confrontation with history's textual construction enables an exploration and interpretation of ideologies of the past. Despite all the criticism of their work—their films are merely about other films, their work smugly proposes the emptiness at the core of art, they hide behind style to avoid moral and ethical issues—the Coen brothers nevertheless set up a connection to history through their pithy investigation into the texts that represent the past. With their keen approach to historical periods and texts of bygone eras, and their reliance on irony and parody, the Coen brothers not only engage



with history but they question and challenge the ideologies by which it is constructed.

When the Coen brothers draw on their vast intertextual web of references in order to inform their films, as is the case in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, they are often accused of elitism; of alienating their audience by servicing only their own penchant for in-jokes and obscure allusions. Yet, when they set their films in more realistic and genuine settings, as in *Fargo*, the brothers are then criticised for mocking their characters. *Fargo* endured a barrage of criticism suggesting that the film's portrayal of the Mid-West region's people was condescending and exploitative. Talk-radio audiences in Minnesota complained that the film ridiculed them and their culture, and McKinney suggested that not only was the dialogue inaccurate in its representation of the true regional dialect but the application of it by the Coens served merely to diminish the characters rather than particularise them. (18) It is true that many of the characters in their films are foolish or ridiculous but often this is indicative of their disposition. Ethan Coen declared in an interview the objective of representing Carl and Jerry (William H. Macy)—the nefarious 'masterminds' of *Fargo*'s abduction plan—as so inept:

*One of the reasons for making them simple-minded was our desire to go against the Hollywood cliché of the bad guy as a super-professional who controls everything he does. In fact, in most cases criminals belong to the strata of society least equipped to face life, and that's the reason they're caught so often. In this sense too, our movie is closer to life than the conventions of cinema and genre movies.* (19)

The aspects of *Fargo* that undermine and rally against film convention and focus on characteristics more attuned to reality give it a naturalistic identity. Emphasising a character's ineptitude is inextricably linked to an expression of reality and need not be evident of a specific agenda to ridicule a community or a society.

Joel and Ethan Coen are often censured for failing to commit to moral or ethical positions and chastised for constructing worlds of artificiality. But the truth is, manifest in Levy's pointed condemnation (located at the beginning of this essay), the Coens are victims of a critical establishment which considers visual documentation—film and television—to be unworthy conveyers of the past. The Coen brothers do

know too much about film, they know enough to recognise the conceits of its processes and to detect the values that such systems are designed to support. And they know enough to subvert and criticise these systems in order to construct a valid and important engagement with the past, encapsulating very effective and substantial moral and ethical explorations. The Coen brothers' wonderful ear for dialogue, rigid attention to regional re-constructions, inventive approach to the past, in addition to their professional skill and adroit technique has resulted in some of the most enjoyable (and critically worthy) contemporary films.



**Peter Bradshaw: "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"**  
**(The Guardian, 2000)**

Films by the Coen brothers have always inhabited their own richly, eccentrically imagined universe, but never before have they found one to accommodate such a wealth of unselfconscious fun. [O Brother, Where Art Thou?](#) has brio, wit, and style, and the whole picture is air-cushioned with appealing comedy and its own unassuming good nature. Simply: this is a film which is impossible to dislike, and moves with an easy, approachable swing through the bleached and steaming landscape of bluegrass Mississippi, with its ornery confidence men and cracker-barrel politicians. It's a film to tap your feet to, in every sense: not perhaps so easy with some of the brothers' early work, composed as it has been in 5/4 and 7/8 time signatures.

George Clooney, John Turturro and Tim Blake Nelson play Everett, Pete and Delmar, three sweaty convicts in the South during the Depression, who bust off the chain gang and go on the run. They are looking for the treasure that the smooth-talking Everett assures them he has got hidden, from the job that landed him in jail in the first place. In the course of this hunt, they

find treasure of a different sort: in a ramshackle recording studio, the errant trio pass themselves off as The Soggy Bottom Boys and make a blues record, which becomes a smash hit.

In his wanderings, Everett assumes a sort of Odyssean status, and the Coens whimsically present their movie as the loosest and most amiable kind of Homeric epic, with - amongst other nudges - our heroes being seduced from their path by Sirens, meeting a sinister Cyclops in the form of the one-eyed Bible-salesman Big Dan Teague (John Goodman) and Everett finally returning to his Penelope in the form of his long-suffering wife Penny (Holly Hunter). And in the Homeric spirit, quite a few of the dramatis personae are blind, or partially blind.

But there is a more pressing and relevant form of ancestor worship: screwballmeister Preston Sturges, whose 1942 classic, *Sullivan's Travels*, was about a director of light comedies, who longs to make a harrowingly earnest "message" picture about social injustice called *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* One of the distinctive successes of the Coens' *O Brother* is the way it has managed to channel some of the spirit of Sturges in its zany dialogue and galloping pace, also cloning some of the earlier film's defining moments: the old-time religion, the prison farm, the "church parade" of convicts watching a movie. The anxiety of influence is felt much more strongly from Sturges than the 3,000-year-old Greek poet.

This is far from being George Clooney's first comedy role. In his younger, bigger-haired days, he was a veteran of Roseanne and dozens of unsuccessful sitcom pilots. In this film, he produces a novel, raffish charm as the silver-tongued rogue, and a certain old-fashioned masculine mass and substance, which he wears lightly, but in such a way as to signal unmistakably his arrival in the big-screen big league. Here, Clooney manages to combine a little of Clark Gable with a whisper of Cary Grant's early incarnation as a vaudevillian stage comic.

As for his supporting men: Tim Blake Nelson gets to sing his own blues numbers (Clooney's voice is dubbed by Dan Tyminski). John Turturro's face is stuck in an expression of baffled disapproval, his jaw twisted round to make his face shaped like a J. Clooney is very much the leader of the pack.

But all three find their feet in this baroque, distinctive world, which the Coens devise with such intricate charm. Borges has a short story about a writer whose chef d'oeuvre is a multi-volume

encyclopaedia about an imaginary universe; the Coens write one of these every time they make a movie. To take just one of the many flecks and touches: when Clooney can't get hold of a can of Dapper Dan, his preferred brand of hair-cream, he is piqued to be offered another, absurdly called Fop. One of many happy inventions.

The only reservation I would maintain about *O Brother* is that the invocation of Preston Sturges reminds us that, somewhere amidst the wackiness, Sullivan's Travels actually had serious things to say about real poverty and what real film-makers can really do about it. For all its accomplishment, there is nothing in the Coens' film which speaks of this concern. But it is made with marvellous clarity and fluency, and Joel and Ethan Coen attain a comic simplicity that other film-makers can only dream of.



**Jim Ridley: "Brothers in Arms: Talking with Joel and Ethan Coen about 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?'" (Weekly Wire, 2000)**

Last summer, filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen (*Raising Arizona*, *Fargo*) were in Nashville to find musicians for their latest film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* An episodic yarn that borrows from Homer's *Odyssey*, it stars George Clooney, John Turturro, and Tim Blake Nelson as escaped convicts on a seriocomic journey through 1930s Mississippi, a flight that includes brushes with bluesmen, bigots, gangsters, crooked politicians, and seductive sirens. (The title comes from Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*. It's the name of the movie Sturges' comedy-director hero Sullivan intends as his "serious" picture about the struggles of the Depression.)

Before filming began, the Coens took the unusual step of recording the music first. For the movie's mix of blues, gospel, and bluegrass, the filmmakers and music producer T-Bone Burnett assembled a stellar lineup that includes Ralph Stanley, Norman Blake, Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris,



Gillian Welch, the Cox Family, and the Whites, and they recorded the music here last year. All those artists and more--plus the Coens themselves--will appear at a benefit show next Wednesday at the Ryman Auditorium, which will be recorded by documentarian D.A. Pennebaker for a concert film.

Soon, the Coens may have even more reason to celebrate. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* screened last weekend to strong notices at the Cannes Film Festival, some of which mentioned the movie as a contender for the top prize, the Palme d'Or. If the Coens win, it would be their second Golden Palm (after 1991's *Barton Fink*). The movie itself will be released this fall. The *Scene* spoke to Joel and Ethan Coen last week from their home base of New York, where they're practicing their sibling harmonies for the Ryman stage.

### How did you choose the music for the movie?

**Joel Coen:** Well, actually, in the movie we used a sort of mixture of period recordings and rerecorded music. But the stuff that was redone and produced by T-Bone is all featured essentially live--it's music you see performed in the movie itself.

**Ethan Coen:** It's not background, it's not working as underscoring, it's actually happening on camera.

**JC:** In other words, it's in the context of the story. At one point, George Clooney sings and records a record that becomes a big hit, a song called "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow." That's all part of the story, so it had to be a combination of prerecorded background instrumentals that the actors or musicians would sing live to on set, or prerecorded with the vocals and then lipsynched.

### Which musicians actually appear in the movie?

**JC:** The Cox Family, the Whites, Chris Thomas King...[John] Hartford was gonna be in it, but he was ill at the time we wanted to shoot his scene. The Fairfield Four are in the movie; they play gravediggers. They do a great version of "You've Got

to Walk That Lonesome Valley." Most of Alison's band is in the movie.

### Were there any artists you wanted specifically?

**JC:** A lot of them were people that we knew and like and are fans of, like Alison and Emmylou and Gillian, and obviously we knew Ralph Stanley and John Hartford and all these guys. But they were

actually brought in by T-Bone. At an early stage we sort of decided what music we wanted. Then T-Bone brought in a lot of different musicians and sort of collectively decided who was going to do what.



### What was the

### selection process like?

**JC:** Well, that was great, actually. At one point T-Bone basically had two days where he brought in lots of different people who all sort of played and sang together. And we got kind of a feeling for who was right. But it was a great experience, meeting all these people and hearing 'em play. It was unbelievable.

**EC:** Ralph [Stanley] coming in was kind of funny. You know, everyone's sort of hanging out and playing, picking, whatever, and then Ralph walked in. It was like they'd wheeled in one of the heads from Mount Rushmore. The whole room just kind of fell silent for a moment.

### What are some of the most memorable songs in the finished film?

**EC:** There are a number of set-piece songs that are almost...not production numbers, because it isn't literally a musical, but have that kind of feel to them. One of the most notable ones is the Ralph Stanley thing, "O Death." Chris Thomas King [who plays a blues musician modeled on Robert Johnson] did a Skip James song, "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues." And there's the Jimmie Rodgers song...

**JC:** ...that Tim Nelson sings. It's really interesting, because he sings that live himself. He's not a trained singer, he's not a recording artist, he's an

actor. But he's got this great country-western voice. He's going to sing in the concert, actually.

**EC:** It's this weird fantasy come true for Tim-- he gets to stand on the stage of the Ryman and perform.

### **We heard something about a sirens' song....**

**JC:** Oh, that's interesting! [The convicts] come upon these three women washing clothes in the river. That's Gillian, Alison, and Emmylou as the three voices. And they're singing this song which is from this old kind of black, bluesy lullaby from the period. Gillian wrote like four or five other verses for it.

### **She's actually in the movie, right?**

**JC:** Yeah, she is. She's trying to buy the hit record that Clooney has recorded, without any success.

**If you have sirens involved, the *Odyssey* parallels must hold pretty close.**

**JC & EC:** (chortling) Yeah, well...

**EC:** We avail ourselves of it very selectively. There's the sirens; and the cyclops, John Goodman, a one-eyed Bible salesman....

**JC:** Whenever it's convenient we trot out the *Odyssey*.

**EC:** But I don't want any of those *Odyssey* fans to go to the movie expecting, y'know...

**JC:** "Where's Laertes?" (laughter)

**EC:** "Where's his dog?" (more laughter)

**How seriously do you intend the reference to *Sullivan's Travels*? Your movie sounds more like *Sturges* than the symbolic movie-within-a-movie that gives *O Brother* its title.**

**JC:** In a way, that's true. There are things in it that are very reminiscent of *Sullivan's Travels*, but in a sense I would say "reminiscent of" instead of rip-off. (laughs) In our minds, it was presumably the movie he would've made if he'd had the chance. The important movie. The one that takes on the big, important themes.

**EC:** And if he'd been steeped in Homeric literature and early country music (laughter).

### **Aren't they the same thing?**

**JC:** Yeah, that's what T-Bone likes to say. They're both verbal traditions. Oral traditions.

**EC:** That's about as far as it goes, though.

### **What are you working on next?**

**JC:** We're doing a movie about a barber in Northern California in the early 1940s. (Pause, then accusingly:) I think I heard a little snicker there. I was in Texas a while ago, and I told that to Ann Richards, the former governor. She looked at me for about 20 seconds and said, "I'm trying real hard to get excited about this."

**EC:** There's more to it than Joel lets on. He actually is a barber, but he's interested in getting into *dry cleaning*.

**While you're on stage at the Ryman, are you going to favor us with a tune? "The Coen Brothers" does sound like an old-time hillbilly act.**

**JC:** Oh, yeah.

**EC:** Yeah, I'm bringing my washboard, and Joel's bringing his spoons. (Issues a laugh like a car alarm going off.) Wait for us, we're coming on last!



### **Bernard Weinraub: "An Ex-Convict, a Hit Album, An Ending Fit for Hollywood" (NY Times, 2002)**

On a mid-September day in 1959, an inmate in the Mississippi State Penitentiary named James Carter led some of his fellow prisoners in singing "Po Lazarus," a bluesy, melancholy old work song about a man who is hunted and gunned down by a sheriff with a .44.

In the course of a long, hard life that followed, Mr. Carter, a sharecropper's son, forgot about that day, the song and the man who captured it on tape, Alan Lomax.

Until about two weeks ago, when two people visited him in his Chicago apartment to give him some amazing news -- and a \$20,000 check.

Last week, he boarded an airplane for the first time, flying to Los Angeles, where he was celebrated



for contributing to the Grammy Awards victory of the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, which won album of the year honors.

The album's producers used the version of "Po Lazarus" Mr. Carter recorded in prison for Mr. Lomax, a musical archivist and music writer who was traveling the American South with his tape recorder.

For more than a year, as "O Brother" climbed the charts and sold millions of copies, its producers searched for Mr. Carter, 76, not only to acknowledge his contribution but to pay him thousands of dollars in royalties.

How they found him is an unusual story in an industry rampant with tales of swindled royalties, corruption and stolen song credits.

Searching through the archives of the Mississippi penal system, Social Security files, property records and other public records and various databases, the record's producer, T-Bone Burnett; the Lomax archives; and an investigative journalist for a Florida newspaper found Mr. Carter in Chicago with his wife, Rosie Lee Carter, a longtime minister of the Holy Temple Church of God.

Less than two weeks ago, Mr. Lomax's daughter, Anna Lomax Chairetakis, who runs the archives, and Don Fleming, director of licensing, visited the Carters and presented a platinum album of the soundtrack and a royalty check for \$20,000 -- the first installment of what may become several hundred thousand dollars in payments. Mr. Carter, a former shipping clerk, told them he had never heard of the album or the film.

Mr. Fleming mentioned that the album was outselling the latest CD's of Michael Jackson and Mariah Carey. "I told him, 'You beat both of them out,' " Mr. Fleming said. "He got a real kick out of that. He left the room to roll a cigarette and when he came back, he said, 'You tell Michael that I'll slow down so that he can catch up with me.' "

Mr. Burnett said he first heard the work-gang song about five years ago when he was listening to music in the Lomax archives in New York City. "It

just made a deep impression," he said. "It was such a beautiful version, a soulful version of a great song."

Later, when Mr. Burnett began working on the album, the song was placed first on the soundtrack of the film, which was made by Joel and Ethan Coen. The film is a sort of Depression-era fable loosely based on "The Odyssey." The soundtrack, on the Lost Highway label of the Universal Music Group, features a powerful cross section of



Southern roots music by performers like Ralph Stanley, Alison Krauss and Union Station, and Emmylou Harris. The soundtrack won four other Grammy Awards in addition to album of the year.

Mr. Carter will earn royalties for being the lead performer on the Lomax recording used on the album. Because "Po Lazarus" is in the public domain, he will also earn songwriter royalties, which go to the performer once the copyright expires. Mr. Burnett said Mr. Carter's royalties could run "well into the six-figure range."

The album has sold five million copies and was the No. 2 country music album on the Billboard chart this week, after Alan Jackson's "Drive." The Grammy triumph is expected to push sales far higher.

Mr. Carter said over the phone that he was not sure what he would do with the money. His daughter Elizabeth Scott, a real estate broker, said she and her two sisters were relatively well-off. Their children include a Chicago police officer.

Ms. Scott said that although her parents were comfortable in a large apartment of a building they own in the Austin area of Chicago, they might use their windfall to find an apartment more appropriate to their needs. Mr. Carter often uses a wheelchair.

Mr. Carter's early life was not easy. He left home at 13, and ended up in the Mississippi prison system four times, the Lomax organization found. Two convictions were for stealing, another was for a parole violation for possessing a gun and a fourth was on a weapons offense. Mr. Carter said he remembered being in prison only once.

The Lomax organization said Mr. Lomax recorded the song at Camp B at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Lambert. Mr. Lomax, who is 87 and lives in central Florida, has explored and promoted folk music around the world for more than six decades. In the 1950's he focused on the American South, and issued 16 albums on the Atlantic and Prestige International labels. In his Southern trips, Mr. Lomax, using a tape recorder, often sought out the music of the African-American South.

Mr. Fleming, the Lomax licensing director, said the assumption early on was that Mr. Carter might be dead. He began searching for Mr. Carter by checking Social Security death records. Then, using the Freedom of Information Act, Mr. Fleming began looking through the files of the parole board in Mississippi and found evidence that Mr. Carter had moved to Chicago around 1967.

At the same time, Chris Grier, a reporter for The Sarasota Herald-Tribune who was working on a project about Mr. Lomax's life, came in contact with Mr. Fleming. Using the newspaper's databases, Mr. Grier came up with a list of James Carters in the Chicago area. Because the name was common, Mr. Grier said, he began concentrating on spouses. He tracked down Mrs. Carter's name on property records.

"She owned a storefront church," Mr. Grier said. When he met Mrs. Carter, Mr. Grier said, she told him her husband's birth date and said he had spent years in Mississippi. Further investigation convinced Mr. Grier that this was the James Carter he was looking for. The Lomax group, after meeting Mr. Carter, confirmed that he was the man they were seeking.

In the years after prison, Mr. Carter worked at a number of jobs, including as a shipping clerk, but seemed unable to focus on any one occupation.

Mr. Carter was initially reluctant to fly to Los Angeles for the Grammy ceremonies, but Ms. Scott told him it was "the chance of a lifetime." He flew

with his wife, Ms. Scott and his other daughters, Hattie Tucker and Corie Macklin.

He said over the phone on Friday that he was flattered by all the attention, but that he just wanted to get on with his life. He said he barely recalled "Po Lazarus."

"I sang that a long time back."

### **O Brother, why art thou so popular? (BBC)**

Up against such big names as U2 and Bob Dylan, few people gave a bunch of little-known country musicians much chance of walking away with one of the most prestigious awards at the Grammys.

But that was what happened when the music from the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* became

the first soundtrack to win the album of the year prize

since 1994. Grammys host Jon Stewart told everybody to go out and buy it - but many will not need to as it

has sold more than four million copies and has been one of the most unexpected hits of recent years.

Variouly described as bluegrass, roots, mountain music and old-time country, it contains rustic sounds of harmonies, gospel choirs, mandolins, guitars, violins and banjos.

First popular in the 1920s and 1930s, the styles owe their comeback to the comedy film by Joel and Ethan Coen, which is based on Homer's *Odyssey* and stars George Clooney.

"The reason for our using so much of the era's music in the movie was simple," Ethan Coen said.

### **'Involved'**

"It is compelling music in its own right, harking back to a time when music was a part of every day life and not something performed by celebrities."

The Coen brothers enlisted veteran musician and producer T-Bone Burnett, who had helped put together the music for their last film, *The Big Lebowski*.





"Being so heavily involved in roots music, we called him before we'd even finished the script," Ethan Coen said.

Burnett preferred to be known as the "music archivist", but "music supervisor" would have been more accurate as he went about finding the songs for the film with singer-songwriter Gillian Welch.

One of the inspired choices was to revive a tune called I Am A Man Of Constant Sorrow, a folk song from the Appalachian mountains first recorded in 1922.

### **Anthem**

In the film, it became the anthem that made Clooney's band, The Soggy Bottom Boys, Depression-era stars.

In real life, it was recorded by Dan Tyminski, Harley Allen and Pat Enright and became the anthem that made the soundtrack a hit.

Mr Tyminski provided the singing voice for Clooney on the film, and had to warn his wife, Elise, the first time they watched it that when Clooney would sing, she would really hear her husband's voice.

"Your voice coming out of George Clooney's body? Dan, that's my fantasy!" she replied.

Other musicians to feature on the CD included Emmylou Harris, Alison Krauss, the Whites, the Cox Family, John Hartford, and 75-year-old Ralph Stanley.

### **Spin-offs**

While the film was an arthouse hit, nobody expected its music to go on to have so much success that it has taken on a life of its own.

First there was an O Brother concert in Nashville, then a documentary that had its own

soundtrack, a United States tour and an O Sister album.

Mr Burnett also won a Grammy for a follow-up CD, *Down from the Mountain*.

And it has all



happened with little radio airplay.

It may not be chart material - but that may be why so many people like it.

### **Songs:**

James Carter and group: ["Po Lazarus"](#)

Stanley Brothers: ["Man of Constant Sorrow"](#)

Dock Boggs: [Oh Death](#)

[Bessie Jones' version](#) from the Georgia Sea Islands

## **JUST ONE MORE IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, SPRING 2021, SERIES 42**

**May 4 1982 Ingmar Bergman *Fanny and Alexander***

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From that bridge in Edwards, Mississippi, Walker Evans, 1936



From that bridge in 1997





**The guitar song playing while the blind seer is prophesying at the beginning is Skip Jame's "Harrrd Times," a depression blues. The first stanza of that song:**

Hard times here an' everywhere I go  
Time is harder than ever been before  
People are driftin' from door to door  
Can't find no heaven, I don't care where they go

**"Big Rock Candy Mountain," Harry McClintock,, 1928:**

One evening as the sun went down  
And the jungle fire was burning,  
Down the track came a hobo hiking,  
And he said, "Boys, I'm not turning  
I'm headed for a land that's far away  
Besides the crystal fountains  
So come with me, we'll go and see  
The Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
There's a land that's fair and bright,  
Where the handouts grow on bushes  
And you sleep out every night  
Where the boxcars all are empty  
And the sun shines every day  
On the birds and the bees  
And the cigarette trees  
The lemonade springs  
Where the bluebird sings  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains  
All the cops have wooden legs  
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth  
And the hens lay soft-boiled eggs  
The farmers' trees are full of fruit  
And the barns are full of hay  
Oh I'm bound to go  
Where there ain't no snow  
Where the rain don't fall  
The wind don't blow  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains  
You never change your socks  
And the little streams of alcohol  
Come trickling down the rocks  
The brakemen have to tip their hats  
And the railroad bulls are blind

There's a lake of stew  
And of whiskey, too  
You can paddle all around 'em  
In a big canoe  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
The jails are made of tin  
And you can walk right out again,  
As soon as you are in  
There ain't no short-handled shovels,  
No axes, saws or picks,  
I'ma goin' to stay  
Where you sleep all day,  
Where they hung the Turk  
That invented work  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

I'll see you all this coming Fall  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains"

**Ralph Stanley, "Oh Death"**

Oh, Death  
Oh, Death  
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

What is this that I can't see?  
With ice-cold hands takin' hold of me  
Well, I am Death, none can excel  
I open the door to heaven or hell

Oh, Death  
Oh, Death  
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

I'll rattle your tongue 'til you can't talk  
I'll step on your limbs 'til you can walk  
I'll blind you eyes 'til you can't see  
This very hour, come go with me

Oh, Death  
Oh, Death  
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

Oh Death, how you're treatin' me  
You're blindin' my eyes 'til I can't see  
You stiffen my limbs, makin' me cold  
Run my body right out of my soul

Oh, Death  
Whoa, Death  
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?  
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?  
Won't you spare me over 'til another year?

[Additional verses, not included in this recording:]

I'll fix your feet 'til you can't walk  
I'll lock your jaw 'til you can't talk  
I'll close your eyes so you can't see  
This very hour, come and go with me

This is Death, I come to take the soul  
Leave the body and leave it cold  
To drop the flesh off of the frame  
The earth and worms both have a claim

**Jamees Carter and group, "Po' Lazarus,"  
recorded by Alan Lomax**

Well, the high sheriff  
He told his deputy  
Want you go out and bring me Lazarus  
Well, the high sheriff  
Told his deputy  
I want you go out and bring me Lazarus  
Bring him dead or alive  
Lawd, Lawd  
Bring him dead or alive  
Well the deputy he told the high sheriff  
I ain't gonna mess with Lazarus  
Well the deputy he told the high sheriff

Says I ain't gonna mess with Lazarus  
Well he's a dangerous man  
Lawd, Lawd  
He's a dangerous man  
Well then the high sheriff, he found Lazarus  
He was hidin' in the chill of a mountain  
Well the high sheriff, found Lazarus  
He was hidin' in the chill of the mountain  
With his head hung down  
Lawd, Lawd  
With his head hung down  
Well then the high sheriff, he told Lazarus  
He says Lazarus I come to arrest you  
Well the high sheriff, told Lazarus  
Says Lazarus I come to arrest you  
And bring ya dead or alive  
Lawd, Lawd  
Bring you dead or alive  
Well then Lazarus, he told the high sheriff  
Says I never been arrested  
Well Lazarus, told the high sheriff  
Says I never been arrested  
By no one man  
Lawd, Lawd  
By no one man  
And then the high sheriff, he shot Lazarus  
Well, he shot him mighty big number  
Well the high sheriff, shot Lazarus  
Well he shot him with a mighty big number  
With a forty five  
Lawd, Lawd  
With a forty five  
Well then they take old Lazarus  
Yes they laid him on the commissary gallery  
Well they taken poor Lazarus  
And the laid him on the commissary gallery  
He said my wounded side  
Lawd, Lawd  
My wounded side