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Tales Told in Tunes: Folk Music Traditions in the Coen Brothers' Independent Filmmaking

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This video essay examines the films of the Coen Brothers, arguing that their distinctive and compelling approach to filmmaking reflects the essence of creating folk music. It posits that the Coen Brothers can be considered folk filmmakers, drawing parallels between their cinematic techniques and the characteristics of folk music.

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Creator's Statement

Across the cinema landscape convergence culture has provided rich material for exploration and analysis. My video essay delves into this very intersection, specifically examining how independent cinema and folk music intertwine within the films of the Coen Brothers. This exploration is a critical inquiry that sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between these two art forms. By focusing on the Coen Brothers' film *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), I attempt to elucidate how folk music serves as a foundational element for meaning creation in their work, and how this, in turn, reflects broader trends within independent cinema.

Independent cinema provides a platform for filmmakers to express unconventional ideas and stories that may not find a place in the mainstream. Independent films frequently explore themes of identity, society, and human experience in ways that are both intimate and yet innovative. Joel and Ethan Coen are quintessential figures in the realm of independent cinema, their films renowned for their distinctive style, dark humor, and complex characters. After engaging with the Coen Brothers' filmography, I identified a recurring element that ties their work together: popular music. Music in their films is not just a background element but a critical component that enhances narrative and emotional depth. Whether it is the bluegrass soundtrack of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) or the folk music of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the Coen Brothers use music to enrich the storytelling and thematic resonance of their films.

Michael Z. Newman's suggestion that "'Art' and 'Indie' are both cultural categories, and cultural categories exist in the minds of the participants in a culture" (2011: 51)

is particularly illuminating. By framing 'independence' as a cultural phenomenon, Newman permits us to similarly consider 'Folk' as a cultural category. This perspective enables us to evaluate the overlap between these two art forms, revealing how both independent cinema and Folk music are shaped by and contribute to the cultural landscapes they inhabit.

To understand the role of Folk music in *Inside Llewyn Davis* it is essential to define what Folk music represents. Folk music, by its nature, is a form of storytelling. It is music that emerges from the people, reflecting their lives, struggles, and histories. Folk music often conveys profound truths through its lyrics and melodies, creating a sense of shared experience and continuity where:

> Folk song gives us a kind of perpetual present, but in this present is an affective ache for the ruins of time as well as an as-yet-unrealized tomorrow. Its off-modern nostalgia involves both displacement from the past and distance from an idealized future where the conflicts of the present are resolved and a collective identity or community is finally reestablished. (Cole, 2021: 103)

In examining the Coen Brothers' approach to filmmaking, it became clear that independent cinema and folk music share fundamental similarities. Both art forms prioritize authenticity, emotional resonance, and storytelling. In this way we can consider the alternativity of 'independent cinema' in the same way that Ross Cole suggests we can conceive of, 'folk song as outsider antipathy to the modern world of capitalist industry' (2021: 4). Just as Folk musicians draw from personal and communal experiences to create their music, the Coen Brothers draw from a rich tapestry of cultural, historical, and personal influences to craft their films.

As a foundational idea I have explored Neil Sinyard's (1985) approach to the relationship between film and popular music. Referring to Richard Lester's work in the 1960s, Sinyard suggested that "Lester is to be commended for the way in which the musical virtuosity of some of the performers is allied to a corresponding technical virtuosity of direction, photography, and editing" (1985: 6). This assessment of Lester highlights how the technical aspects of filmmaking can harmonize with musical elements to enhance the overall artistic expression. To that same end, the Coen Brothers demonstrate their own virtuosity by seamlessly integrating music into their films. The meticulous way they align musical elements with their technical filmmaking skills, crafting scenes that are as visually and narratively compelling as they are musically resonant, exemplifies their mastery and reinforces the significance of music in their storytelling.

This approach, particularly when focusing on the Coen Brothers as a case study, serves as an extension and extrapolation of Newman's (2011) understanding of independence. Newman's insight provides a foundational understanding of how independent cinema and Folk music operate within the same cultural framework, challenging mainstream conventions and offering alternative narratives and aesthetics. By examining the Coen Brothers' films through this lens, I offer a new interpretation that underscores how they epitomize this intersection.

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Biography

Martin Hall is an Associate Professor in Film Studies and the Course Leader for Film Studies and Media & Communication at York St. John University, UK. His research focusses on European Art Cinema, American Independent Cinema, the Mountaineering Documentary, and Cinema and Social Justice. His last three books were *Women in the Work of Woody Allen* (2018), *The Mountain and the Politics of Representation* (2023), and *Monstrosity and Global Crisis in Transnational Film, Media and Literature* (2024). He is a co-editor for Amsterdam University Press' Cinema and Social Justice book series. In over ten years as an academic he has made significant contributions to academia, film production, and the promotion of emerging filmmakers.

Reviewed by Ariane Hudelet, Université Paris Cité

In "Tales Told in Tunes," Martin Hall investigates how folk music shapes the cinematic identity of the Coen brothers. The videographic form is particularly well-suited to this inquiry, as it foregrounds the interrelation of sound and image that defines the films' meaning. (See, for instance, Greene in 2020 and 2022, Kreutzer and Loock 2025.)

Hall positions his analysis within auteur studies, arguing that the Coens' distinctive use of folk music functions as an "authorial stamp" through which their oeuvre may be situated in American cinema. While *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) is the central

case study, supercuts extend the scope to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) among others, highlighting the recurrence of folk traditions across genres and decades.

The video essay also connects this musical analysis to the contested category of 'independent cinema.' For Hall, independence is less economic than aesthetic, defined by authorial distinctiveness and cultural positioning. Drawing on the Folk Music Council's notions of "continuity," "variation," and "selection by the community" (Karpeles 1955: 6), he demonstrates how these principles illuminate the Coens' practice. The split-screen analysis of *Inside Llewyn Davis* effectively illustrates repetition and variation as both musical and narrative structures.

Formally, the video essay achieves a careful balance between voiceover and sound, allowing the music to resonate while integrating touches of humor—most memorably in the ironic pairing of "distinctive filmmaking style" with the *Fargo* (1996) woodchipper sequence. The pacing of commentary and imagery mirrors the melancholic tone of folk music itself, aligning form and argument.

Ultimately, "Tales Told in Tunes" provides a stimulating account of how music contributes to the Coens' authorial identity while complicating the categories of 'folk' and 'independent' cinema. More broadly, Hall's approach could encourage other similar works of videographic criticism: future work might explore how traditions such as jazz in John Cassavetes' cinema or classical music in Stanley Kubrick's function as comparable authorial signatures, shaping the intersection of music, style, and cultural identity.

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Reviewed by Oswald Iten, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts / Lucerne School of Art and Design

In "Tales Told in Tunes," Martin Hall explores the ways in which "folk music as a genre identity" is ingrained in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen. A montage of clips from several films reminds us how much screen time musical performances take up and—assuming the audio-viewer's familiarity with the films in question—how organically they are embedded in the respective narratives. Hall makes an eloquent argument that the Coens' connection to American folk music goes much deeper than weaving it into their narratives or making films 'about' musicians. With the help of a folk music definition from 1954, he sketches an original analogy between the ever-evolving folk tradition "linking the present with the past" and the Coens' very own brand of postmodern storytelling.

By focusing on *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) and, to a lesser degree, on *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), "Tales Told in Tunes" underlines how much the Coen Brothers tap into ideas associated with the influential Greenwich Village music scene as well as with the multilayered appropriation and evolution of oral traditions like Homer's *Odyssey*. Hall delivers his line of reasoning with great verve via a well-structured voice-over narration that is punctuated by short moments in which the music or a line of dialogue take central stage. At first glance, most film clips take a backseat to the verbal argument. But over the course of the video essay—not least thanks to the many ghostly dissolves and blurs—they seem to merge into an archetypal afterimage that transcends their different visual styles: the introverted man strumming a guitar, a stalwart of both American folk music and independent cinema.

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