

# Poor Man's Copyright: Intellectual Property and Cultural Depictions of the White Working Class in American Popular Music

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## Abstract

The growing literature on cultural depictions of the White working class in American popular music has touched on issues of copyright, compensation, and residual ownership of song rights. This study expands upon existing work by conducting case studies on three influential figures in American music history: Stephen Foster, Woody Guthrie, and Phil Walden. Though each of these figures produced popular music in different historical and cultural contexts, the music they produced depicted—and was marketed to—the White working class. Interestingly, each of these figures also struggled to effectively assert and manage the copyrights in their respective works, both within formal music industry structures and to their audiences. Cultural perceptions and bias played a role in the challenges they faced, as did their own incomplete understanding of intellectual property. By situating male White working class musicians as simultaneously less privileged than industry elites and more privileged than other marginalized groups, this study may help to illuminate a greater understanding of the ways that race, gender, and class intersect in American popular culture.

Keywords: copyright law, music history, popular culture, popular music, production cultures

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