

Tobias Marx, *a Brief Portrait of: Vernon Dalhart's  
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«Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)»  
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*Department of Musicology Weimar | Jena*  
«*Voices & Singing in Popular Music in the U.S.A. (1900–1960)*»\*

*a Brief Portrait of:*

**VERNON DALHART'S**  
*The Prisoner's Song*

*Tobias Marx*

**Abstract**

The Prisoner's Song was the first million selling song of hillbilly music and the only hit of Vernon Dalhart. He sings with a classical trained voice but the song topic and the musical accompaniment are clearly hillbilly style. The recording opened up hillbilly to a broad audience preparing the rise of later country music. The Prisoner's Song was incorporated into the tradition of country music and was covered many times.

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## 1 BIOGRAPHY

Marion Try Slaughter was born on 6<sup>th</sup> april 1883 in Jefferson, Texas. Later he combined the names of two cities in Texas to his artist name *Vernon Dalhart*. He studied classical music at the conservatoire in Dallas and started performing approx. in 1911. Dalhart's first recordings are registered in 1915. In 1924 he had a hit with the single 'Wreck the Old 97', including 'The Prisoner's Song'. The Song was presumably written by Dalhart's cousin Guy Massai. Dalhard recorded the song with 12 or more different music companies<sup>1</sup>. The song sold more than one million copies. Dalhart was soon displaced by other hillbilly interpreters. With the collapse of the music market during the Great Depression his music career ended. Afterwards Dalhard taught singing and worked as doorman until his death in 1948 (Gridgeport, Connecticut) caused by a heart attack.

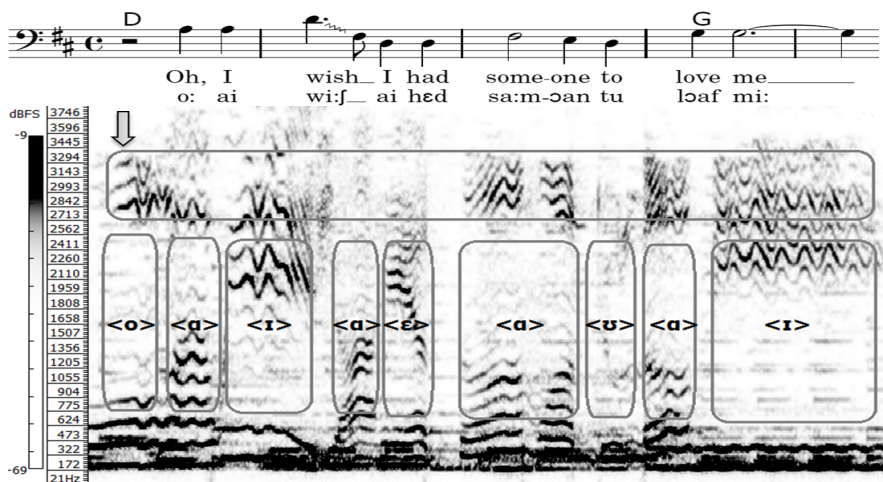
## 2 CLASSICAL VOICE

Dalhart's voice cleraly displays traits of classical trained singing. Between 2.5kHz and 3.3kHz his singers formant can be found (see figure 1). His articulation of vowels is constant (see figure 1, too) he uses Standard American English. Dalharts vibrato is audible on every medium to long sung tone. It sounds very classical although it is not as regular (see figure 2) as the vibrato of for instance Mahalia Jackson. Dalhart applies ornamentation to the melody on equal spots in each verse disregarding semantic content. Most of these are single trills upwards from B to C#. To stress content carrying words he uses onset delay, sometimes up to a quaver. The melody contains a downward glissando in each first measure every second text line. Dalhard tends to extend the glissandos over time (see figure 3).

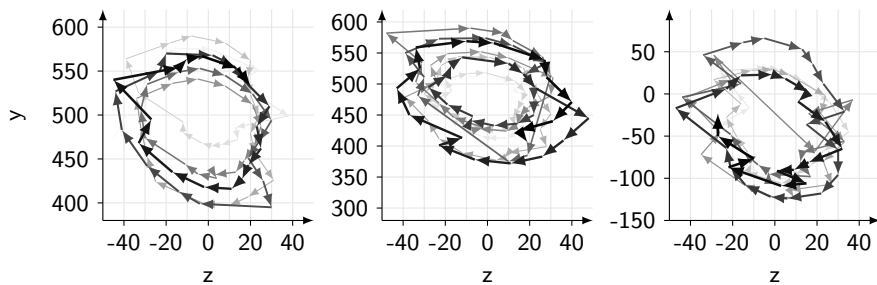
Summing up the findings it shows that Dalhard sings with a classical voice, displaying a constant singers formant, quite unregular vibratos and constant ornamentation as well as rubato onsets and extending glissandos.

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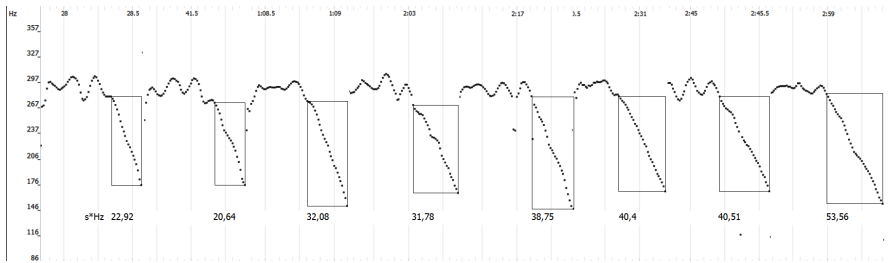
<sup>1</sup>See Malone (1985), p. 64.



**Figure 1:** ▶ Vernon Dalhart. Notation and spectrogram of the first line. The IPA-transcription displays no southern dialect. The singer's formant (marked with an arrow) is constant throughout the whole song. Same vowels show very similar energy peaks, best seen in comparison of <a> and <i>. (Symbols in the figure are not official IPA symbols.)



**Figure 2:** Vernon Dalhart. Vibratos at second 31.7 and 58.6 and 191.7. A perfect vibrato would display one circle. The audible pitch is located in the center of the circles. Dalharts vibratos are to some extent unregular. The first is centered slightly below 500 cent (500c represents the fourth tone of the scale). The second vibrato is more correct in pitch but also more unregular. The third vibrato is meant to hit the fundamental but it's pitch is approx. 30 cent lower. (Edges in progressions are measurement errors and do not contain information about the quality of the vibratos.)



**Figure 3:** Vernon Dalhart. Comparison of all large downward glissandi: The first 4 rectangle area measures (frequency  $\times$  time) lay below the mean value (35.8) of all squares, the last 4 above.

### 3 HILLBILLY SOUND

Dalhart's producer Ralph Peer called Dalhart a 'pseudo-hillbilly' in an interview<sup>2</sup>. Dalhart adopted the style to meet the taste of the listeners. The text of *The Prisoner's Song* contains themes typical for Traditionals like desire for care, stability and safety. The mood of the song is constantly melancholic. The simple and harmonic musical accompaniment stays in the background while providing a simple meter. Music and text meet with Dalhart's classical sounding voice and the sound of a viola, allowing the listeners of the early 1920's to approach hillbilly music.

#### References

- Haden, W. D. (1975), *Vernon Dalhart*, in: *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave McOn to Johnny Rodriguez*, University of Illinois Press.
- Malone, B. C. (1985), *Country Music USA. revised*, University of Texas Press, Texas.

<sup>2</sup>See Haden (1975), p. 78.