The Moonshiner Popcorn Sutton, a volume of photographs, essays, and interview transcripts, is part of Neal Hutcheson’s multidecade efforts to document the life and work of the famous Appalachian moonshiner Marvin “Popcorn” Sutton (1946–2009). Preceded by several films by the author about Sutton, this beautifully presented book is billed on the back cover as “the full story of the man behind the legend.”

Hutcheson is an author, filmmaker, and producer affiliated with the Language and Life Project at NC State University. His diverse range of films records lesser known but significant aspects of North Carolina cultures in transition, from Core Sound fisheries to mountain music. He has an abiding interest in language and has particularly focused on the struggles to preserve Appalachian, Black, and indigenous dialects and languages in the state. Interviewing people in the western North Carolina mountains about dialect initiated a working relationship with Sutton early in his career. The ensuing years spent shadowing Sutton shaped multiple projects that sought to bring the complexities of Appalachian culture to unfamiliar audiences, while documenting aspects of mountain life that are often perceived as passing out of recognition.

Sutton, a Haywood County native, remains one of the most famous moonshiners in the world. Known as an old-time craftsman with a dedication to quality, he became notorious as a colorful TV star who defied the law by running illegal shine on camera for a variety of documentaries, including Hutcheson’s early films. His operations straddled the border between North Carolina and Tennessee, a secluded area of the Blue Ridge that he knew intimately. The book touches on the important role that the Great Smoky Mountain National Park played in the gradual mainstreaming of moonshine, as tourists conditioned by stereotypical media representations of Appalachia came in search of “authentic” mountain culture. By “leaning-in” to the perceptions of outsiders (27), Sutton’s deliberately manufactured “hillbilly” aesthetic brought him fame and prosperity, and his iconic image left a legacy that continues to characterize legal moonshine marketing today.

Hutcheson’s early films were arguably vehicles that catapulted Sutton into the domain of reality TV. The Emmy-winning film The Last One (2009) and A Hell of a Life (2013) achieved cult status by introducing this Appalachian “outlaw” figure whose hostile relationship to

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NEAL HUTCHESON is a filmmaker, author, and photographer. He has been the recipient of a North Carolina Arts Council Artist Fellowship, the North Carolina Folklore Society Brown-Hudson Award, and The North Carolina Filmmaker Award. His documentary films, including: Talking Black in America (with Danica Cullinan, The Language & Life Project, 2017), First Language: The Race to Save Cherokee (with Danica Cullinan, The Language & Life Project, 2015), both of which received regional Emmy awards; Core Sounders: Living from the Sea (The Language & Life Project, 2013) also received an Emmy nomination. Land and Water Revisited (Empty Bottle Pictures, 2021) aired on PBS. He has also adapted Gary Carden’s stage plays The Prince of Dark Corners and Birdell for the screen. He is a founding member of Empty Bottle Pictures. He lives in Raleigh, NC.

Read more about Popcorn Sutton in an interview with Kerry Madden in NCLR 2008 and an essay by her in NCLR Online 2020.
mainstream American culture was also an implied subject of the works themselves. Sutton later appeared in numerous television programs on PBS, CMT, the History Channel, and the Discovery Channel. After being sentenced to jail time while suffering from cancer, he died in 2009 cementing his reputation as a legendary folk hero who would rather die than submit to government authority. The pain of this loss infects Hutcheson’s essays, which investigate the boundaries between the man himself and the public image. Sutton was both “an archetypal mountain moonshiner, the point of courting stereotype, and yet, remarkably real and present” (40).

Any documentarian seeking to represent marginal figures to a broader audience faces challenging ethical dilemmas and must guard against commodifying their subject. In this book, Hutcheson’s approach to depicting Sutton shows he is aware of the dangers. His introduction plus three essays labeled “Further Reading” take the time to outline some of the core concerns of the academic field of Appalachian Studies, wherein many writers have criticized the exaggerated depictions of outlaws, hillbillies, and moonshine that court a national or global audience to the detriment of the region’s reputation. Hutcheson resists Joy’s peddling of nostalgia by ending his book “with the loss of a golden age, declaring Sutton’s Appalachia “a culture on the brink of extinction” (17). To declare it a loss is to deny the privilege of modernity to a region in flux — a region that is still very much alive, even as its identities multiply, its composition diversifies, and its people produce new, more inclusive cultural forms to market to curious outsiders.

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