

## THE VITRUVIAN OUTLAW

*a review by Jessica Martell*

Neal Hutcheson. *The Moonshiner Popcorn Sutton*. Reliable Archetype, 2021.

*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 moonshiner programs on PBS, CMT, the History Channel, and the Discovery Channel. After being sentenced to jail time while suffering from cancer, Sutton's suicide in 2009 cemented his reputation as a legendary folk hero who would rather die than submit to government authority. The pain of this loss inflects Hutcheson's essays, which investigate the boundaries between the man himself and the public image. Sutton was both "an archetypal mountain moonshiner, to 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 critiqued the exaggerated depictions of outlaws, hillbillies, and moonshine that court a national or global audience to the detriment of the region's reputation. Hutcheson clearly states his belief that degrading Appalachian stereotypes are "a repulsive expression of inequitable power dynamics in the nation" (27). At the same time, what makes anything truly Appalachian is anything but clear, he notes. Sutton provides

an apt subject to illustrate the complexity of the debate over authenticity.

One way that this book aspires to realism is to present Sutton in his own voice through extensive interview transcripts. The Sutton recorded here is humorous, barbed, and always seems to have the edge on those around him. From the rowdy threats on the signage of his property ("WHAT PART OF NO GOD DAM TRESSPASSING [sic] DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND . . . STAY OUT OR BE CARRIED OUT" [166]) to the carefully curated gravestone he commissioned several years before his death ("POPCORN SAID FUCK YOU" [167]), his X-rated gift of gab illustrates the signature quick wit undergirding his reputation, suggesting that the distinction between person and persona is smaller than one might think. The photographs help color myriad anecdotes and exhibit Sutton's style.

Even as he intends to tell the "unvarnished facts" about the man he knew, Hutcheson describes the difficulty of leaving behind popular perceptions about him (29). His choice to make this struggle transparent lends the book its credibility, although some shortcomings are on display as well. The ratio of space devoted to evincing the large, boisterous public persona, especially by letting him speak so much, overshadows some unsavory details that linger long after the all-caps noise, exemplified above, have faded.

According to the author, Sutton was forthcoming about his ancestry but never discussed his own numerous family ties: "His life as a moonshiner was in fact

tightly interwoven with a secret history of relationships, populated by women and children who have (for the most part) chosen to remain anonymous" (105). Sutton was a negligent father who denied his paternity or remained estranged from most of his children. In *Daddy Moonshine* (2009), his daughter's account of failing to know her famous father, Sky Sutton writes, "He may be a phenomenal moonshiner but sadly he's a complete loss as a father" (qtd. on 105). Without violating anyone's anonymity, I wonder what else could have been done to expand the discussion of these less-than-heroic realities. What would it look like, post #MeToo, for a weighty contribution to the public record like this book to actually treat these "tightly interwoven" stories as central features of Sutton's life and legacy (105), rather than as intriguing sidebars?

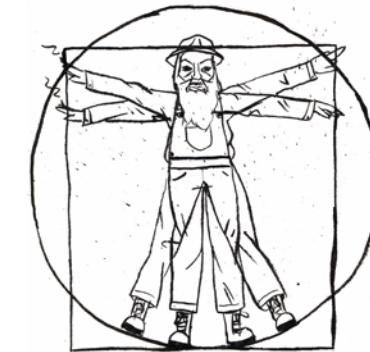
To his credit, Hutcheson does include them, acknowledging that not everyone who knew Sutton enjoyed his generosity like he did. Yet the choice to devote so much of the text to Sutton's own words has the effect of omitting the fallout from the discomfort, and even trauma, his choices must have caused to those around him. The glimpses that this book provides into the domestic danger and turbulence of Sutton's secret personal life – such as his insistence on showing polaroids of himself performing oral sex on an unidentified woman to anyone who entered his stillhouse, "whether they want[ed] to see them or not" (144–45) – creates an unsettling backdrop that, for many, will overshadow the masculinist focus on craft.

In contrast to so many accounts of Sutton, this book

takes a more measured approach to his legacy. If some fans are moved to declare Sutton "one of the last real men left in the world!!!," or see his law-defying trade (ironically) as a "stand against the law to take care of family and neighbors," Hutcheson contextualizes their remarks as romanticized notions from those who view Appalachia as the "embodiment of the best of traditional America" (qtd. 188). Scholars have long challenged such misunderstandings. The great rural theorist Raymond Williams warned against glorifying any lost Golden Age, which he famously called "a myth functioning as a memory." As Mark Essig writes, the "mood-altering substance Popcorn peddled was not so much ethanol as an ersatz nostalgia."\* Yet nostalgia is hard to shake. Even the first preface of this book, written by David Joy, mourns the loss of a golden age of old timers, 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.

Hutcheson resists Joy's peddling of nostalgia by ending his own introduction with a direct contradiction of the extinction thesis. Although Sutton "made a lot of noise about being *the last one*," the author notes, "in pri-

vate, he shared another opinion: *They'll make it as long as water runs downhill. Somebody will*" (31). In other words, moonshine will always be made, even as it evolves and changes hands. The book instead implies what is really gone – the time before reality TV and other oversimplified, short-form media came to dominate the public's consumption of regional cultures in transition from past to present. One valuable claim is to position Sutton not as an artifact of a bygone era, but as a modern man, though one could argue that his performativity is thoroughly postmodern. One striking feature of this book as artifact is a bonus print, also included on the title page and etched into



COURTESY OF RELIABLE ARCHETYPE ILLUSTRATION

the cover, that depicts Sutton as Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man." In the famous sketch, da Vinci proposes the alignment of the human form with the workings of the universe, centering humanity in Renaissance visions of the cosmos.

While such an image romantically exaggerates Sutton's heroism, it also suggests his control over his own destiny. The book underscores Sutton's complicity

with, and enjoyment of, his own commodification; for instance, he learned to dress, adapt his moonshine still, and otherwise embody a hillbilly from the *Snuffy Smith* cartoon strip in his local newspaper. Sutton delighted in the "bankable reputation" produced by his notorious image, and it is significant that he licensed his name over to a legal distillery venture before he ended his life (170), allowing him to participate in the coming commodification of moonshine in its legal form.

For fans of Hutcheson's moonshine films, this book could feel redundant, as many of the most intriguing moments in the transcripts have already been included in them. But the book offers a valuable entry for those new to Sutton's practice because the author contextualizes the figure of the hillbilly and the public image of moonshine with vital scholarly research. For those who are familiar with Sutton and wish to learn more about his last arrest, trial, and eventual suicide, Hutcheson's postscript, inflected by personal memories and insider knowledge, provides a rich account of Sutton's last months and some insightful analysis of his legacy. If Sutton "came to embody . . . the pride of the downtrodden, a class not restricted by ethnicity or nationality" for a global legion of admirers (191), then this book offers an invitation to reexamine a seemingly universal story for the very real, very specific complexities beneath the heroic veneer. ■

\* Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford UP, 1973) 43; Mark Essig, "[Pop]Corn from a Jar," *Gravy* 24 Sept 2015: [web](#).

ABOVE Popcorn Sutton as da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man," by Ruby Hutcheson