COUNTRY MUSIC OVERVIEW

Country music has hit the mainstream: from "regional to national, from ridiculed stepchild to full legitimacy of American popular music." Country music is the product of a collision, some seventy years ago, between Northern businessmen and rural Southern white musicians. While country is America’s fastest growing music, some feel its growth has been at the expense of its identity. Country music has strayed far from its hillbilly beginnings to become "commercial country music," one of America’s most profitable musical offerings.

HILLBILLY

The Hillbillys new genre of music was born in the early 1920s with Fiddlin’ John Carson and Vernon Dalhart. Public response was surprising, but the new genre still lacked a name. "Old Time Songs," "Old Familiar Tunes," and "Mountain Ballads," were offered as names for the new sound. Gradually a single name emerged that summed up America’s feelings about the new music: hillbilly. The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were early pioneers of hillbilly music, with the former offering a slightly updated version of old mountain balladry and the latter extending his influence the length and breadth of country music. African American musicians had an impact on early country music. Frank Walker, who with Ralph Peer was one of the greatest hillbilly-era producers, said, "On the outskirts of a city like Atlanta, you had your colored section and then you had your white—I’m sorry to use this word, you had what they used to call ‘white trash’...They passed each other every day, and a little of the spiritualistic type of singing of the colored people worked over into the white hillbilly, and (vice versa)." The Depression sent the record business into a struggle for survival. However, it did not kill country music; instead, it pushed it to new heights of popularity and "professionalism." Early hillbilly recording artists were amateurs who earned their living as railroaders, millworkers, and miners. The Depression, however, made it difficult for these laborers to continue their part-time music-making endeavors. These casual artists were replaced by professional, aspiring musicians. Radio had become the medium of Depression-era hillbilly music, and it also helped select a new type of performer. In an essay he wrote on country music in the Depression-era, Bob Coltrane says, "The old shouters and straightforward pickers...were replaced by) suppler, sweet singers."

The new professionalism brought an impatience with the term "hillbilly." A new image was waiting in the wings, born by the steady diet of Western films that left Americans cowboy-happy. The cowboy image stuck.

HONKY-TONK

Honky-tonk music originated out of Texas in the thirties and outskirts-of-town hangouts where oil workers and factory hands flocked at night. Old-time hillbilly music and its often sentimental themes seemed suddenly out of place. Honky-tonk patrons wanted "tougher fare," and the sound changed to suit demand. Another reason for the new sound was that singers had to be heard over the clinking glasses, the brawls, and the din of people unwinding. Texan Ernest Tubb was not looking to revolutionize country music when he hired an electric guitarist; he just wanted to be heard in the honky-tonk bars.

The themes in the music embodied America: the "opposing tugs of country and city; the collapse of traditional supports like family, community, church; rural American’s hard adjustment to
urban life." The fiddle and steel guitar sounds of honky-tonk dominated country music until the mid-fifties. The music hit its creative peak in the early fifties, was forced underground by rock n’ roll, and reemerged in the sixties.

COUNTRY MUSIC

The nationwide spread of country music owes much to the second World War. Thousands of Southern boys entered the service, exposing Northern GIs to country musicians. Supporting the spread of country music was the curiosity the mainstream press was finally showing. "The Grand Ole Opry," broadcast nationally from Nashville over NBC radio since 1939, was attracting a large number of country stars. By 1950, country music record producers were heading to Nashville.

Rock n’ roll’s initial impact on country music in the mid-1950s was disastrous. Radio stations dropped country in favor of the new sound, which also affected record sales. In a deep slump in 1957, country music’s efforts to recover took two paths: "rockabilly," a synthesis of country music and rhythm in The Everly Brothers, Johnny Cash, and Wanda Jackson mode, and "the bland style known as countrypolitan," which sought to wean mainstream pop fans away from Dean Martin and Perry Como. Country music was becoming diluted, "becoming too pop," and leaving behind its hillbilly roots. Records were selling, but many artists were feeling the divergence. In 1964, according to Time, the country music industry (including radio, records, and concerts) earned a hundred million dollars. But the music was often "wan and saccharine." The reaction was to return to "hard country" and honky-tonk’s gritty sound.

Country’s next area of emphasis was Southern California, where thousands of uprooted Midwesterners had settled. Buck Owens and Merle Haggard were among the first of this group. Owens retired after ten years of hits, but Haggard remained, and has provided country music’s best body of work since that of Hank Williams. Haggard’s style is one he calls "country jazz." Bill Monroe maintained the acoustic country music subculture, and is given credit for developing the bluegrass genre.

By the mid-sixties, the counterculture was reaching country music. "Most country singers supported the Vietnam War, patriarchy, truck drivers, and Richard Nixon." In 1966, Bob Dylan began recording his folk-rock music in Nashville. Gram Parsons was the first member of the counterculture to play authentic country music, and though he died at the age of 26, he managed to draw thousands of rock fans to country music.

By the late sixties, a group of young Nashvillians were "growing their hair, smoking pot, and questioning the Vietnam War." They rebelled musically, too, led by Dylan’s and the Beatles’ influence. After Janis Joplin cut his song "Me and Bobby McGee," Kris Kristofferson became the hottest songwriter in Nashville. His successes touched off Waylon Jennings’ brooding early-seventies country-rock and Willie Nelson’s superstardom. Nelson formed an Austin-Nashville group called the Outlaws, which intended to regain control of their music from Nashville’s powerful producers. A 1976 album called "Wanted: The Outlaws" was the first country album to sell one million copies and made Willie and Waylon country music’s ambassadors. Even rock fans loved them.
The "generation of George Jones, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings was the last great infusion of country music creativity..." Ricky Skaggs’ electrified, bluegrass sound was given the name New Traditionalism. Dwight Yokum fell in love with California honky-tonk. Clint Black and Randy Travis, though almost always classified as New Traditionalists, "lack Emmylou Harris’ passion or Dwight Yokum’s bite."

CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

The latest strain in country music to emerge, called country pop or "Contemporary Country," is country music’s most "thorough self-evisceration yet. Whether generally self-expressive or blandly commercial, Contemporary Country represents country music’s problematic future." This feeling is not shared by Nashville’s accountants. Country music record sales almost quadrupled from 1985 to 1993, and though rock is still the nation’s most popular music, country is the fastest growing. Some feel the industry’s financial success has dissolved the remaining heritage of country music. "Severed from its working-class origins, country music is becoming a refuge for culturally homeless Americans everywhere."

Much is being said about the blurring of lines between country and other types of music. Increasingly, young people are alternating between country and alternative rock, and the music has found a place among rural or suburban and cosmopolitan fans alike. The debate remains, however, about whether country music’s evolution into the fastest growing musical format in America has cost it its soul.

(Note: This topic discussion derives from Scherman, T. [1994, November]. Country. American Heritage.)

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