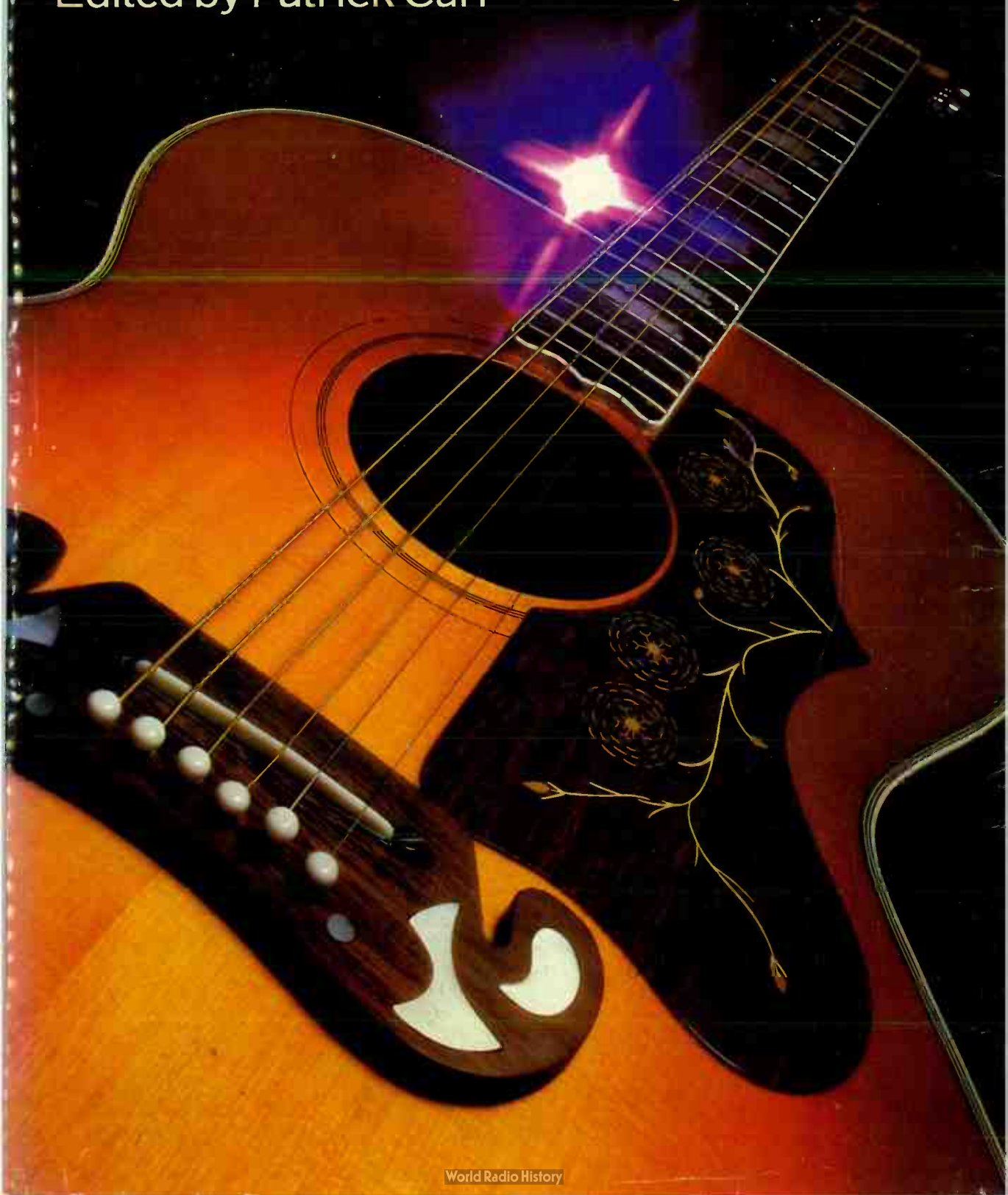


# The Illustrated History of **COUNTRY MUSIC**

The Editors of Country Music Magazine

Edited by Patrick Carr



The evolution of country music—the folk music of America’s white, mostly rural working class—began as soon as the first settlers set foot on American soil; the original roots, however, predate the New World in some cases by centuries, for the oldest elements of country music are descended directly from the folk music of Elizabethan and pre-Elizabethan England, Scotland, and Ireland.

After the Industrial Revolution arrived in America, with its rapid development of communications, America’s folk music expanded and changed at an ever-accelerating rate. Before then, when the population was primarily rural and isolated, change was slow indeed; hence, for almost two hundred years, the folk songs available to Americans were still essentially British in origin (as, for that matter, was the “high” culture of the rich and the town dwellers). The core of these songs was brought over by the first settlers, and the songs ranged in age from medieval times to the days immediately before the ships sailed for the New World. Since the Middle Ages there had been a thriving folk song culture among the English peasants and urban poor, and since these people were illiterate, the songs had been passed on orally from generation to generation. This process continued to function with little interruption once the settlers had established themselves in America; the songs were stories of love, death, drama, and infamy, and in those days of slow change they lost none of their appeal from generation to generation. They enabled the singers and listeners to see the world in very personal terms.

*from*

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Out of a few English folk songs modified by Appalachian settlers, American country music began with nothing more than a fiddle and the human voice. With the sophistication of recording technology and the techniques of modern merchandising, the backwoods pastime has become a billion-dollar industry.

The editors of *Country Music Magazine* explore this transition in **THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF COUNTRY MUSIC**, an authoritative, up-to-date chronology tracing the development of the genre from the Carter Family to Dolly Parton. Containing over 100 photos, it follows country music from the hills to Hollywood to Nashville, from records to radio to rock 'n' roll.

Out of a Saturday night radio show called "The Grand Ole Opry" there arose Nashville—Music City, U.S.A. As the recording capital of country music the city launched the careers of such legendaries as Hank Snow, Hank Williams, Eddy Arnold, and Tammy Wynette. But the Nashville Sound would change with the energetic rockabilly style of Elvis

*(continued on back flap)*

(continued from front flap)

Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Buddy Holly, and again later with the emergence of outlaw songwriters such as Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Waylon Jennings, who disliked the slick, manufactured quality of Nashville-produced tunes.

In more recent years, with the arrival of such artists as Gram Parsons, Commander Cody, and Linda Ronstadt, country music has been reaching an increasingly large segment of the pop and rock music audience. What once appealed only to the rural hinterlands now attracts jean-clad rock fans as well as more conservative listeners. In examining the structure, style, and content of this distinctly American art form **THE ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF COUNTRY MUSIC** reveals the root of its broad appeal.

This is a book for both popular music lovers and country-western fans—a fascinating look beyond the Nashville image of sequined shirts and cowboy boots into the tastes, trends, and talents of a major industry.

Patrick Carr, once a professional musician himself, is the former editor of *Country Music Magazine*. He has contributed to countless national magazines, including *Rolling Stone*, *New Times*, *The Village Voice*, and *Crawdaddy*. He is currently at work on *Guitar*, a book of interviews with the world's greatest guitar players.

JACKET PHOTOGRAPH BY WILSON SOUTHAM  
JACKET TYPOGRAPHY BY JUDITH TURNER

ISBN: 0-385-11601-2

Printed in the U.S.A.

*The  
Illustrated  
History of*  
COUNTRY  
MUSIC

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WITHDRAWN

*by the editors of  
Country Music  
magazine*

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*edited by*  
Patrick Carr

A Country Music Magazine Press Book  
Doubleday & Company, Inc.  
Garden City, New York  
1979

## Acknowledgments

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This book has been a group endeavor of a number of authors working both together and separately. Charles K. Wolfe is the author of Chapters 1, 2, and 12; Douglas B. Green wrote Chapters 3, 6, and 8, and collaborated with Bob Pinson on Chapter 4 and with William Ivey on Chapters 10 and 11; J. R. Young was re-

sponsible for Chapter 5, and Roger Williams wrote Chapter 7; Nick Tosches is the author of Chapter 9. Together they have produced an outstanding work.

All of the photographs not otherwise identified are from the *Country Music* magazine archives.

✓  
784  
529

Library of Congress Cataloging in  
Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Illustrated history of country music.

1. Country music—United States—History and criticism. I. Country music magazine. II. Carr, Patrick.

ML3561.C69I4 784

ISBN: 0-385-11601-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number  
77-82936

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
FIRST EDITION

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## Chapter One

# *Across the Ocean, into the Hills*

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The evolution of country music—the folk music of America’s white, mostly rural working class—began as soon as the first settlers set foot on American soil; the original roots, however, pre-date the New World in some cases by centuries, for the oldest elements of country music are descended directly from the folk music of Elizabethan and pre-Elizabethan England, Scotland, and Ireland.

After the Industrial Revolution arrived in America, with its rapid development of communications, America’s folk music expanded and changed at an ever-accelerating rate. Before then, when the population was primarily rural and isolated, change was slow indeed; hence, for almost two hundred years, the folk songs available to Americans were still essentially British in origin (as, for that matter, was the “high” culture of the rich and the town dwellers). The core of these songs was

brought over by the first settlers, and the songs ranged in age from medieval times to the days immediately before the ships sailed for the New World. Since the Middle Ages there had been a thriving folk-song culture among the English peasants and urban poor, and since these people were illiterate, the songs had been passed on orally from generation to generation. This process continued to function with little interruption once the settlers had established themselves in America; the songs were stories of love, death, drama, and infamy, and in those days of slow change they lost none of their appeal from generation to generation. They enabled the singers and listeners to see the world in very personal terms.

One way to understand the archetypal elements of these “old” songs is to understand ways in which the American pioneers modified and cus-



tomized them. In many cases, we have early printed song texts from England that tell us what songs were like before they crossed the ocean; folk song study had become stylish in England by the turn of the nineteenth century, and antiquarians wandered about the country collecting and later publishing these "reliques of ancient poetry." Such study did not become popular in America until the 1880s, and even then, Americans were more interested in English folk songs than in their own. By the time serious collection of American songs had begun in the early twentieth century, the American folk

had had over a hundred years to tinker with their borrowed songs, and some of their customizing was wonderful to behold.

An old Irish song about going to America, "Canaday-i-o," modified into a song about lumberjacks, and, as the frontier pushed even farther west, into a song about buffalo hunters. Such well-known songs as "Sweet Betsy from Pike" and "The State of Arkansas" are British survivals with only minimal changes. There is also the case of the cowboy song "The Streets of Laredo," about a cowboy dying of a gunshot wound. Though the song contains all

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*The Binkley Brothers Dixie Clodhoppers, a colorful "Opry" band from the 1920s. From left to right: Tom Andrews, Gale Binkley (holding a cigar-box fiddle), Jack Jackson, and Amos Brinkley. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*



manner of references to the Old West—spurs, six-shooters, saddles, rifles, cowboys—it contains the refrain:

*Oh beat the drum slowly and play the  
fife lowly,  
Play the dead march as you carry me  
along,  
Take me to the green valley, and lay  
the sod o'er me,  
For I'm a young cowboy, and I know  
I've done wrong.*

If the reference to fife and drum seems out of place in a song about the wild West, one can understand it better by comparing the Americanized text with the British version, which features a soldier dying of venereal disease. Though the Americans changed the setting and the circumstances of death—violence in the American folk imagination has always been more acceptable than sex—the reference to the British military funeral, with drum and fife, somehow remained intact. Odd, unexplained retentions like this mark many British ballads transplanted into American rural culture; mountaineers continued to sing old songs describing “milk-white steeds” and “knights” and “London town,” though they knew of London vaguely only as a city “across the water.”

The ways in which Americans changed these old British ballads tell a lot about the character of the American people. One thing the people did was to shorten the songs; a song originally called “The Lass of Loch Royal,” for instance, ran to thirty-five stanzas in its original form, but survived in America in only three stanzas—the basis for the lovely country lyric “Who’s Gonna Shoe Your Pretty

Little Foot?” The old ballads described tragic events with a cold, detached, impersonal air; the American versions allowed the singer more involvement and reflected more sentiment toward the sad events of the song. This movement from the ballad (objectivity) to the lyric (emotional subjectivity) song form was to continue into the country music of today, where the majority of songs are emotional and sentimental.

British songs were also full of the supernatural, especially avenging ghosts and ominous omens. In “The Gosport Tragedy” a young man murders his pregnant girlfriend because he does not want to marry her; the murderer tries to escape on a ship, but the ship cannot get wind to sail, and the ghosts of the girl and her baby then appear on board and tear “him all in three.” Singers in Kentucky renamed the song “Pretty Polly,” dropped the whole section on retribution, with its supernatural overtones, and reduced the song to a grim, no-nonsense description of the murder itself. The American version usually ends:

*He threw a little dirt over her and  
started for home,  
Leaving no one behind but the wild  
birds to mourn.*

The old ballads are full of lovers’ quarrels, but instead of getting a divorce, as in modern country music, the protagonists here usually settle their business with a knife or a club. Even with this level of violence, though, the American ballads were generally more genteel than their British counterparts; some of the blunt descriptions of physical love found

in British originals are missing from American versions. This is understandable when we realize that most American versions were being adapted during the Victorian age, when the sight of a woman's ankle was enough to cause a man to grit his teeth.

Occasionally, when the words of an Old World song were almost totally unadaptable to American culture, they were stripped away entirely and a completely new set of words was put to the old melody. An Irish song describing a rebellion in 1798, "Hurrah for the Men of the West," was fitted with completely different words to become "The Old Settler's Song" (with its familiar refrain "surrounded by acres of clams"). From this point it was easy to take the next step and create entirely new songs, with fresh words and fresh music. Thus a native American balladry arose next to the imported British balladry, and Americans were soon singing their own songs about their favorite outlaws, cowboys, murders, or disaster. The first collectors of folk songs were so interested in British songs that had survived in North America that they almost completely ignored the native ballads; but hundreds of these songs existed and they were far more popular than the British survivals.

Naturally, the native American songs were based on the structure of the British songs, but again there were some interesting differences. American ballads were more journalistic, giving names, dates, and places more readily than their British counterparts. We learn the name of the bank Jesse James robbed, the town the murdered girl lived in, the date of the great train wreck. In many cases,

American singers also tacked a moral on the end of their song. At the end of "Pearl Bryan," a Kentucky song about two medical students who murder a girl and cut off her head, we hear:

*Young ladies, now take warning; young  
men are so unjust;  
It may be your best lover, but you know  
not whom to trust.  
Pearl died away from home and friends,  
out on that lonely spot;  
Take heed! Take heed! Believe me,  
girls; don't let this be your lot!*

The American Puritan ethic, after all, held that art for art's sake was frivolous, and for years American writers felt a pressure to justify their fiction by showing its morality. The folk composer felt the same pressure, and morals were tacked onto songs in ways that at times seem ludicrous. The long story of the "Wreck of the Old 97" is supposedly designed to admonish girls to "never speak harsh words to your sweetheart/He may go and never return." Even when a natural disaster occurred and no person could possibly be blamed for it, singers drew morals about the power of God. At the end of a song about a Mississippi River flood, we are told simply: "Let us all get right with our Maker/as He doeth all things well." Such tags tended to make the songs into moralistic parables—for those who wanted moralistic parables. For most listeners, the tag was probably a formality and a way to justify enjoying a good song.

In an age before radio or phonograph records, most of these old songs were naturally transmitted via oral tradition. Much of this transmission apparently took place within the family; one modern study of folk singers

in Tennessee revealed that over three quarters of the songs were learned from family members. Of course, the diffusion was horizontal as well as vertical; as various members of a family spread out around the country, especially on the frontier, they took their songs with them. Songs were carried up- and downriver by boatmen, and cross-country by railroad workers and section hands. Various itinerant minstrels roamed the land, often playing for nickels and dimes on courthouse lawns and in railroad stations. Many of the musicians were blind and

had turned to this style of performing as one of their few available means for making a living.

In one sense, these anonymous minstrels were the first professional country musicians. About the only thing many of them left behind was a handful of tattered "ballet cards"—postcard-sized sheets containing the words to a favorite song they had either composed or popularized. The minstrels would often sell these cards to help pay their way, and the cards are direct descendants of the broadside ballads about current events once sold

*The Morrison family of Searcy County, Arkansas, at the turn of the century. Although two of the brothers later recorded for Victor in the 30's, most of the Morrison music-making, like much early string-band music, was a family affair. Courtesy the Morrison family.*



in the streets of eighteenth-century England. Yet the cards also show that not all the folk songs were transmitted orally; many a text obviously started from these printed cards, and many of the old mountain singers had scrapbooks full of pasted-in ballet cards, or handwritten copies of such cards. Some early publishers even came out with books that were little more than bound reproductions of these early ballet cards; one such book was *The Forget-me-not Songster*, which dates from the early 1800s and which contained numerous old broadside ballets from the War of 1812 and the Revolutionary War. Later on in the nineteenth century, newspapers and magazines provided still other ways for folk songs to get printed.

But in order to understand the effect of a music on society, we have to also know something of the singer and his role in society. What of the singers of these old songs?

Though the minstrels were important in song transmission, they were a rather small percentage of the overall singers, most of whom were farmers, mountaineers, and wives and husbands who sung for their own enjoyment. Cecil Sharp, who visited dozens of traditional singers in the mountains about the time of World War I, reported that very few of them seemed to have any sense of audience in their performance; most were so interested in the message of the song that they were unaware of what effect they were having. Singing was very much a natural part of life; one singer told Sharp that he couldn't remember the words to one particular song and then exclaimed, "Oh if only I were

driving the cows home I could sing it at once!" All kinds of people sung for Sharp: men, women, children. "In fact," he recalled, "I found myself for the first time in my life in a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal a practice as speaking."

It is noteworthy that Sharp, and later collectors as well, have found as many women singers as men; as we shall see, women seldom played instrumental music in the mountains. Perhaps the folk communities saw singing as less a specialized art than fiddling or banjo picking. The early collectors also noticed that most of the singers performed without any instrumental accompaniment; the image of the typical folk singer today, replete with guitar or dulcimer, has relatively little historical support. The old-time singers sang with the "high, lonesome sound" and sang free of the rigid meters of the guitar. Nor were they self-conscious about the age of the songs; they were not consciously preserving old songs because they were old, but keeping the songs alive because the songs appealed to them. Sharp found that many of his singers did not know the history referred to in many of their old ballads, and once when he told a woman the "facts" behind the song she had just sung, the woman was delighted. "I always knew the song must be true," she said, "because it is so beautiful."

By the early 1900s people were looking on the southern mountains as sort of a giant cultural deep freeze, where songs and music that had died out elsewhere were still preserved in their original state. As early as 1904, a writer



The cover for a 1889 paperback songster; such songbooks were often published by patent-medicine companies, and contained, amid numerous “testimonials” about the efficacy of the remedy, texts for popular minstrel and vaudeville songs of the day, in addition to a few genuine folk songs. Given away free as advertising, these songbooks helped spread countless songs across the South. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.

for Harper’s was describing a people “hidden among the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas” whose music was “peculiarly American”; these mountaineers sang “many ballads of old England and Scotland” and their taste in music had “no doubt been guided by these. . . .”

Cecil Sharp, the first collector to actually prove that the mountain songs included British survivals, assumed

that the isolation of the mountain folk was responsible for the preservation, and assumed that such preservation was unique to the southern mountains. In fact, later collectors found as many “child ballads”—songs of demonstrably English origin—in New England as in the South, and such songs have also turned up in non-mountainous areas like Mississippi and Texas. The South, with its veneration of tradition and love of the old values that the folk songs represented, probably did preserve more of the music than other parts of the country, but as early as the turn of the century, the South acquired a popular image as the only source for old-time songs; it was this image that caused folk-song collectors, and later record companies, to go into the South after their material.

In truth, the South was not all that isolated from outside musical influences. The development of the railroad and logging industries brought outsiders into the mountains and gave natives a chance to travel; and the Spanish-American War and World War I allowed southern soldiers to bring back infusions of the popular culture of the day. By 1920 Sears was sending out into rural America over five million copies of their catalogues, offering cheap instruments, song books, and sheet music, and many of these catalogues were going into the South.

Sheet music was by no means unknown in the mountains, and many songs once thought old folk melodies have been traced to published, copyrighted songs by nineteenth-century Tin Pan Alley composers. A song from

sheet music would somehow get into the mountains, it would be passed on through several generations by word of mouth, a few words would be changed or simplified, and the author and the original source eventually forgotten. The song would become just another "old song" like the more genuine folk ballads.

George D. Hay, the founder of the "Grand Ole Opry," recognized this phenomenon when he said: "The line of demarcation between old popular tunes and folk tunes is indeed slight." It is thus possible to find early sheet music "originals" for many well-known folk and old-time country songs, including "The Ship That Never Returned" (1865), "Maple on the Hill" (1880), "The Letter

Edged in Black" (1897), "Please Mister Conductor, Don't Put Me Off the Train" ("Lightning Express") (1898), and "Kitty Wells" (1861). Even the Carter Family classic, "Wildwood Flower," has its original source in an 1860 published song. In fact, this is an excellent instance of how the oral-transmission process can change the words of a song. The Carters, who apparently learned the song orally from someone in the mountains, usually sang the first line, "Oh I'll twine with my mingles/and waving black hair." This line had never made very good sense, and more than a few people puzzled over the meaning of the word "mingles." The explanation may lie in the original sheet music, in which the first line reads, "I'll twine 'mid the Ringlets." Somewhere along the line someone misheard the term "ringlets," or decided that the line was too hard to sing, and during the sixty years between its original publication and when the Carters found it in the Virginia hills, the line was simplified. So is "Wildwood Flower" a folk song or a popular song? It has elements of both genres, and it shows how the two cultures could and did interact in the early history of country music.

Nineteenth-century popular culture influenced archaic country music directly as well as indirectly. Even when it was not absorbed into the folk tradition, early popular music reached into the South and into the hinterlands via the immense popularity of the minstrel shows, vaudeville, the medicine shows, and songs of composers like Dan Emmett and Stephen Foster. All too often we tend to see

An 1843 *minstrel-music folio*. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.



music in nineteenth-century America as nothing but old ballads and fiddle tunes; in fact, from the 1820s America had a form of Tin Pan Alley music. A hit song during this time was defined not through record sales or radio airplay, but through sheet-music sales. Many homes had pianos, and in an age before radio and television, most families made their own music, and if they wanted to hear the latest hit, they sang it themselves.

Of course, there was professional entertainment as well. The minstrel show was one of the most enduring forms of this. The minstrel show was a series of tunes, jokes, and skits performed by white men dressed in blackface; much of the appeal of the show stemmed from this caricature of black music and black culture. The classic minstrel show consisted of three parts: a section of songs and jokes, an "olio" of skits and specialty numbers, and a longer drama or dramatic parody. In the 1830s a performer named Thomas ("Daddy") Rice dressed in blackface and rags and created a character named Jim Crow; soon Rice was popular across the country, and the idea of blackface entertainment was established. In 1843 four noted blackface comedians banded together to form The Virginia Minstrels, and the minstrel show itself was established. The Virginia Minstrels traveled throughout the country, including the South, where they proved exceptionally popular. Along with the crude parodies of black life and black culture, the Virginia Minstrels and those who followed them also brought a number of songs and performing styles.

Surviving accounts of these early

minstrel shows suggest that much of the music they played would not seem out of place on the "Grand Ole Opry" today. The Virginia Minstrels featured music of the fiddle and banjo, much like the southern folk-dance music of forty years later. The fiddler Dan Emmett is now credited with composing two songs commonly thought to be folk songs, "Old Dan Tucker" (1843) and "Blue Tail Fly" (1846). In fact, minstrel musicians either originated or popularized a number of well-known "folk" classics. Minstrel singer Cool White published the popular "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight?" in 1844 under the title "Lubly Fan," and in 1834 a Baltimore publisher issued a song entitled "Zip Coon," which became a country-fiddle standard under its more common title, "Turkey in the Straw." The song might well have been a folk melody before it was published (there are similar tunes in both Irish and English folk music), but its publication and subsequent performance in hundreds of minstrel shows across the country certainly helped establish it as an anthem of rural America.

Instrumental tunes were also popularized by the minstrels; an 1830s folio called *Crow Quadrilles*, for instance, contained the music to several tunes, generally considered "traditional" southern fiddle tunes, including "Zip Coon" and "Gettin' Upstairs." The folio even contains appropriate dance calls for each tune, calls that resemble modern square-dance calls. We know that such folios were sold in the South and that minstrel shows toured widely in the South. Throughout the nineteenth century,



minstrel troupes with colorful names such as the Christy Minstrels, the Sable Harmonizers, Ordway's Aeolians, and the Nightingale Serenaders provided the South with a steady diet of minstrel fare—and pop music. As late as 1925, when Vernon Dalhart was recording the first big-selling country music records, there were still half a dozen minstrel shows touring the country, and even in the 1930s Nashville's radio station WSM was broadcasting a Friday-night minstrel show using several members of the cast of the Saturday-night "Grand Ole Opry."

Even when the large professional minstrel companies broke up, elements of them survived throughout the rural South in the form of the medicine show. The medicine show consisted of three or four people who would pull their wagon or truck into small towns, give a free "entertainment" to attract a crowd, and try to sell various medicines and elixirs of somewhat dubious quality. The shows usually contained all the elements of a larger minstrel show: songs, jokes, skits, and even the burlesque drama (now called the "afterpiece"); the cast included one or two musicians, the "doctor" who hustled the medicine, and often a blackface comedian or a "Toby" clown. (The "Toby" character—named because of the red wig he wore—was a stereotyped rube figure who survived into modern country music as the comedy act, such as the one Spec Rhodes performs with Porter Wagoner.) Roy Acuff got some of his first professional experience traveling with such a medicine show in eastern Tennessee, and recalls that he

strengthened his voice by playing all the different roles in the afterpiece and skits. Clayton McMichen, a member of the famous Skillet Lickers and national champion fiddler, recalled even more recent experiences with such medicine shows:

I worked in medicine shows as late as 1936. I rebuilt me a Dodge Northeast generator of 1,000 watts. Bought a little motor for lights and loudspeaker. We called the medicine shows "the kerosene circuit" or "the physic operas." People had tired feet and you had to be funny. . . . I was raised on one password: "Sold Out, Doc." The medicine to fight neuralgia and rheumatism cost \$1.00 a bottle and we really sold it. We took in \$300 or \$400, traveled in a Model T, carried a hammer and saw to build a platform. Before and after World War I, Tennessee was thicker with physic operas than Georgia. Georgia cracked down on 'em.

The type of medicine sold in the shows, of course, varied from doctor to doctor, from show to show. Many of today's country musicians did their stints in medicine shows, and they tell hair-raising tales of what went into the medicines. Some were made up of just colored water, and some mountain shows actually used complex concoctions of herbs as the elixir, but "Opry" pioneer Kirk McGee recalls getting tangled up with a dope-sniffing doctor who used plain old gasoline as the base for his cure-all. The grass-roots medicine shows lingered on into the 1950s; they may not have exposed the South to the kind of pop hits the larger minstrel shows did, but they did offer employment for musicians and they did

foster commercialization of the music. After all, from one angle the purity of folk tradition is a trap; in the nineteenth century, rural musicians who wanted to make a living playing music full-time simply had no place to go; many were not “folk” musicians by choice. By the turn of the century, a few professional opportunities for country musicians were beginning to open up in the medicine shows and the circuses.

And then there was vaudeville, which emerged in the 1880s as the popular successor to the minstrel shows. Vaudeville apparently developed out of the “olio” section of the minstrel show, and consisted of a *potpourri* of unrelated acts: musicians, comics, acrobats, dancers. Unlike the minstrel and medicine shows, vaudeville acts generally followed a well-defined tour route, since most of the booking was done by companies owning theater chains. While most of these chain theaters were in the East and Midwest, a number were located in key southern cities like Nashville. While some forms of vaudeville existed in the South from the earliest days of the 1880s, it was not until 1917 that the solid, regular routes were established. By 1910 the chiefly southern circuit of Delmar-Keith had some twenty-two theaters doing healthy business, and vaudeville magnate Marcus Loew was mounting a deliberate and expensive campaign to establish his chain in the South. This paid off, and by 1919 vaudeville performers were touring the South from Texas to Virginia.

Vaudeville singers brought even more popular music into the South,

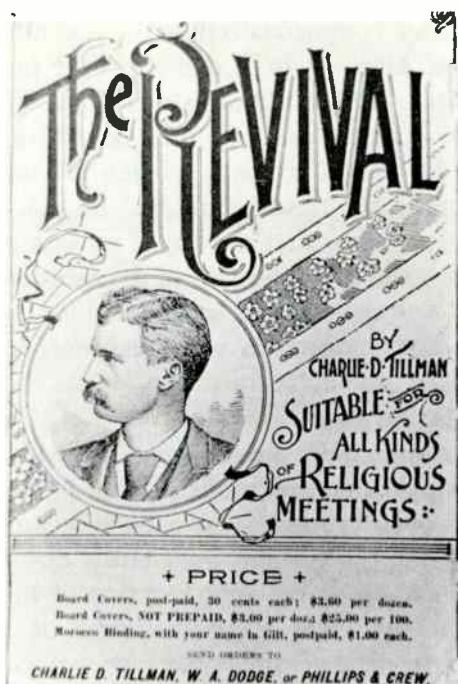
and they did so in the important decade that immediately preceded the first commercialization of country music. Yet most of the vaudeville performers of the 1917–23 era were still northern entertainers; there were very few “hillbilly” performers on the early vaudeville stage. After some of the first-generation hillbilly performers began to record and broadcast in the mid-1920s, many of them joined vaudeville tours: Charlie Poole, Al Hopkins’ Hill Billies, and Uncle Dave Macon all made successful vaudeville tours. Uncle Dave Macon was an exception to the rule: Apparently he toured even before he recorded or broadcast, and did so well for Loew’s Theater chain that a rival chain tried to hire him away.

By the late 1920s vaudeville was acting as a two-way conductor of musical styles: It was bringing Tin Pan Alley music into the South, and it was taking southern performers into the North and Midwest. For a number of years after the development of the mass media of records and radio, vaudeville and personal appearances still remained the best source of income for the would-be professional country entertainer.

Thus the commercial and the folk traditions fed countless songs into the repertory of the rural southern singer. But many fine singers ignored both these traditions in favor of yet a third: the sacred tradition. For entire generations of rural singers, church music and gospel music provided the main outlets for singing; many singers first learned to sing sacred songs, and many others refused to sing anything but sacred songs.

Throughout the nineteenth century “singing conventions” were held annually or quarterly in courthouse squares and churches across the South; people would gather to sing the old songs, visit, and enjoy “dinner on the ground.” Many singers received what formal music education they had from “singing schools,” where a self-styled “singing master” would come into a community and organize a singing class that would run from two to three weeks. At first these schools were run on the subscription basis: Each pupil paid a certain fee to the singing master. Later, some of them were sponsored by local churches or even gospel song-book publishers. Singing-school pupils were taught the “rudiments” of music: how to read notes, how to mark time (some masters did this by having students slap their desks with their hands, with the resounding whacks echoing throughout the countryside, and how to sing parts.

The songs taught at the singing schools were not quite commercial and not quite folk, but an odd combination of both. As Americans in the early 1800s went about settling their new country and establishing a bewildering variety of new independent religious denominations, it soon became evident that many of the sedate Old World hymns did not fit the emotions and the temperament of the New World. New hymns were written, many of them fitted to old folk melodies. Many early hymnbooks were published with words only; one compiler in the late 1700s advised of his texts, “Many of the Scots and English song tunes answer a few of them well.”



*One of the many late nineteenth-century gospel songbooks. Much of this music was assimilated by the folk tradition. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*

The Great Revival—starting about 1801 and sweeping through Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and much of the backwoods South—intensified this sense of grass-roots religion even more; one account from Kentucky describes a particular revival meeting with over two hundred thousand people singing. The frontier churches liked to sing; the Methodist Church, in fact, became known as “the singing Church.”

Native American collections of sacred songs were not slow in coming. While many originated in the North, at least twenty major collections were published in the South between 1815 and 1855. One of the most successful

song books was William Walker's *The Southern Harmony* (1835), a collection of over three hundred songs; the book was soon adopted by churches of all denominations across the South and was reprinted many times. (In fact, the book is still in print today and is still used at the annual "Big Singing" at Benton, Kentucky.) *The Southern Harmony* eventually sold over five hundred thousand copies, and its compiler, dubbed "Singin' Billy" by his fans, became one of the most influential figures in American church music. Walker got to where he would sign his name "William Walker, A. S. H." (Author of *Southern Harmony*).

By this time the more popular hymns and "white spirituals" had attached themselves to one particular melody, and the melodies were printed in many of the song books with an unusual notation system consisting of shaped notes. In shaped-note singing, pitch was indicated by the shape of the note (diamond, square, triangle, etc.) in addition to its position on the staff. In many churches using these books, it was customary to sing the first chorus of a song through by singing the name of the notes ("fa," "so," "la," etc.) instead of the words. This system of singing, which was designed to help semiliterate congregations cope with the printed page, originated in New England in the 1700s. It soon died out there, but it was kept alive in the South, where people saw it as a cultural tradition rather than an expediency. Rural singing masters from Georgia to Virginia continued to compile books using shaped-note music;

they composed some songs, "borrowed" others from earlier books, and "arranged" still others to reflect local singing patterns. Sometimes the authors got credit, sometimes not; many songs from books were committed to memory by congregations and thus entered folk tradition, just like many pop songs published in sheet music did. A Georgia collection, *The Sacred Harp* (1844), was so popular that it gave its name to an entire genre of shaped-note singing; the collection was constantly revised (at one point containing over six hundred tunes) and is still used widely in the South.

As the nineteenth century wore on, the evangelical religions tended to become more commercialized—or at least more organized. Though it was still possible for a local preacher or song leader to issue song books of regional appeal, people like singer Ira Sankey and evangelist Dwight L. Moody were combining their talents to conduct revival meetings on a national scale. The idea of a "revival hymn"—a sort of Tin Pan Alley hymn—became popular with the success of the Moody-Sankey revivals and the publication (starting in 1875) of a series of song books under their auspices. (The song books had reputedly sold nearly fifty million copies by the time of Sankey's death in 1908.) These new gospel songs (the term "gospel" was used in the title of Sankey's first collection) stressed individual salvation and the subjective religious experience more than the older songs of the Sacred Harp singers. The newer songs were considered more up-to-date and tended to de-

scribe the religious experience in rather striking metaphors.

*Life is like a mountain railroad,  
With an engineer that's brave,  
We must make the run successful,  
From the cradle to the grave.*

According to authors Abby and Tillman, if you make it to the "Union Depot," with Christ as your "conductor," you'll meet "the Superintendent, God the Father, God the Son."

Sentiment was in vogue too, and the popular gospel song books of this era also contained numbers like "The Drunkard's Home," "The Drunkard's Lone Child," "The Dying Girl's Farewell," "The Mother's Good-bye," and "Mother Always Cares for You"—songs that made no specific references to Jesus or salvation, but translated the effusive sentiments of salvation songs into secular terms.

A sort of renaissance in gospel songwriting occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, and the period saw a number of well-known titles that later became country music standards. These titles include "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder," "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," "Heavenly Sunlight," "Life's Railway to Heaven," and "Amazing Grace." (This last song, with words penned by John Newton in the eighteenth century, was popularized in America by "Singin' Billy" Walker; it is probably the best-known folk-country hymn today.)

Singing styles for the songs also changed during this period. Small group singing—usually done by a quartet—became popular, and music pub-

lishers began to sponsor professional quartets to tour the South. James D. Vaughan, a music publisher in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, is thought to be the "inventor" of the gospel quartet; as early as 1910 Vaughan hired a male quartet of highly trained professional singers to travel to churches, revivals, and singing conventions, giving concerts and promoting the songs from Vaughan's songbooks. The idea caught on so fast that by the late 1920s Vaughan had some sixteen full-time quartets on his payroll. These quartets were the progenitors of what was to become a strapping cousin of country music, gospel music, and Vaughan's singers set the pace for later groups like the Chuck Wagon Gang, the Blackwood Brothers, and the Statesmen.

Much of the harmony so characteristic of modern country music can be traced to early gospel quartet harmony. Many early country artists, including A. P. Carter, the Delmore Brothers, and the McGee Brothers got their first singing experience in gospel quartets and old-time singing schools, and it is quite possible that country music's love of elaborate metaphor in song lyrics stems largely from the lyrics of nineteenth-century sacred music. In a sense, the gospel tradition acted as a sort of common denominator for most later professional country singers. Regardless of how far apart two singers are in their secular repertoires, they can always get together and harmonize on an "old gospel number."

Next to the human voice, the most important instrument in archaic country music was the fiddle. Fiddles were

small and easy to transport, they could be repaired if damaged, and they could be constructed from scratch if necessary: They were ideal instruments for a society of pioneers moving into the wilderness.

For years, the fiddle was virtually the only folk instrument found on the frontier, and white settlers in the South were probably using the instrument as early as the seventeenth century.\*

Many settlers brought fiddle tunes and traditions from Scotland and Ireland to the New World. Many jigs and reels, like their vocal counterparts, made their way across the water to find new homes and often new names. "Moneymusk," "Soldier's Joy," and

"Fisher's Hornpipe" are eighteenth-century British tunes that entered American pioneer tradition and remained relatively unchanged throughout the years. Many titles were Americanized: "Miss MacLeod's Reel" was rechristened "Did You Ever See a Devil, Uncle Joe?" while a distinguished title like "Lord McDonald's Reel" was redubbed "Leather Breeches"—in tribute to green beans. Old tunes were preserved, new ones were created in similar molds, and frontier fiddlers added personal touches and new strains.

In a rural and semiliterate culture, instrumental tunes were more difficult to preserve than song lyrics; one had to write and read music, and few fid-

\* Most folklorists now agree that there once existed a flourishing tradition of black old-time country music, a tradition that went into eclipse when blues became the dominant black folk-music form. W. C. Handy, famous author of "St. Louis Blues," recalled how this tradition touched his own life. Handy was born in 1873 into a family of freed slaves living in Florence, Alabama.

"With all their differences, most of my forebears had one thing in common: If they had any musical talent, it remained buried. . . . The one exception was Grandpa Brewer, who told me that before he got religion he used to play the fiddle for dances. That had been his way of making extra money back in slavery days. His master, the kindly man that I have mentioned, allowed him to keep what he had earned from playing.

"In his day, Grandpa Brewer explained, folks knew as well as we do when it was time for the music to get hot. They had their own way of bearing down. A boy would stand behind the fiddler with a pair of knitting needles in his hands. From this position the youngster would reach around the fiddler's left shoulder and beat on the strings in a manner of a snare drummer. Grandpa Brewer could describe vividly this old meth-

od of making rhythm, but for his own part he had forsaken such sinful doing, and I had to wait for Uncle Whit Walker, another old-time, to show me just how it was done.

"Uncle Whit, lively and unregenerate at eighty, selected his favorite breakdown, "*Little Lady Goin' to the Country*," and would let me help him give the old tune the kind of treatment it needed. Uncle Whit fiddled and sang while I handled the knitting needles.

*Sally got a meat skin laid away  
Sally got a meat skin laid away  
Sally got a meat skin laid away  
To grease her wooden leg every day.*

"Uncle Whit stomped his feet while singing. A less expert fiddler, I learned, would have stomped both heels simultaneously, but a fancy performer like Uncle Whit could stomp the left heel and right forefoot and alternate this with the right heel and left forefoot, making four beats to the bar. That was real stomping. Country gals and their mirthful suitors got so much enjoyment out of a fiddle at a breakdown or square dance as jitterbugs or rug-cutters get nowadays from a swing band." (W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* [1941], pp.5-6.)



*An informal string band in Tennessee in 1890. The cello was not an uncommon sight in such bands. Courtesy Herb Peck.*

dlers had that skill. Thus nobody really knows how many different fiddle tunes might have existed; a conservative guess by experts places the number at well over a thousand. Many of these tunes had dozens of different names in different parts of the country.

As the country grew, distinct regional fiddling styles developed in areas like New England, southern Appalachia, the Ozarks, northern Georgia, and the Southwest. These playing styles are similar to speech dialects, and modern fiddling devotees can play the same game as *My Fair Lady's* Professor Higgins, placing a man by

listening to his fiddling style rather than his accent.

Like American folk songs that retained Old World phrases, some fiddling styles retained Old World sounds. Many versions of "Sally Goodin" that feature the use of a drone string echo the Celtic bagpipe music that spawned so many old fiddle tunes. Even the pioneer fiddler's habit of holding his instrument against his chest instead of under the chin (as would a "violinist") seems to be a survival from early European fiddlers.

Fiddling had a number of important social functions in the frontier

and farming communities of the nineteenth century. While the individual often played to entertain only himself or his family, to while away long lonely nights, fiddlers were in demand for all types of rural social gatherings. People would often meet for "work gatherings" to do an especially big or arduous job, and then celebrate afterward with a meal and perhaps a dance. Fiddling has been reported at log-rollings, log-raising for barns and cabins, hog killings, "lassy makin'" (molasses making), husking bees, bean stringings, and even quilting bees. In addition to playing at such work parties, the fiddler might also be expected to show up at weddings, shivarees, wakes, the end of cattle drives or roundups, and "moonlights" (community pie-and-ice-cream suppers). Though it wasn't usually possible for a man to make a living playing his fiddle in those days, he could win a great deal of prestige and considerable local fame as an accomplished fiddler. The attitude of a frontier community toward its fiddler is reflected in this description of a local fiddler in Sumner County, Tennessee, in 1793:

He and his fiddle (and they were inseparable) were always welcome, and everywhere. He had a sack of doeskin, in which he placed his "fiddle and his bow," when not in use or when traveling. . . . He could make his fiddle laugh and talk. There was such potency in its music that he often charmed away the pains of the body and silenced the groans of the sick. . . . Whenever there was to be much of an entertainment or considerable dance, the girls would say, "O get Gamble! Do get Gamble! We

know he will come." And Gamble was, indeed, always willing to come.

It was the country dance, or square dance, where the old-time country fiddler really shone. In the South, such dances customarily lasted through the night; in Texas and the Southwest, where people were more scattered and gathering was more difficult, dances sometimes lasted for three days. Often a house was selected, the furniture moved out, a fiddler found, and the dance was on. Sometimes the fiddler was paid—one old custom was "ten cents on the corner," a complicated system relating to the number of sets the fiddler played. Sugar or meal was often spread on the rough wood floor to help the dancers, and prodigious quantities of food were cooked up ahead of time for a midnight supper. The fiddler was usually the whole band; he played by himself, did the dance calls, and lead the singing (if any). If the fiddler's endurance waned as the night wore on, and if his technique slipped into little more than choppy sawing, the audience seldom complained. Ubiquitous stone jugs, pungent and stoppered with corn cobs, helped fuel the festivities, and many an old-time fiddler echoed the sentiments of "Grand Ole Opry" pioneer Uncle Jimmy Thompson: "I just naturally need a little of the white lightning to grease my arm."

Nobody is sure how the country square dance originated; it might have been derived from the French quadrille (some old fiddlers occasionally still call their faster pieces "quadrilles"), or it might have derived from English country dances. Whatever its



origin, the country square dance soon developed a distinctly American quality; it lost much of its Old World dignity, courtesy, and formal movements and became an energetic, foot-stomping "frolic." The fiddle music that accompanied these dances reflected the good-times feeling; even the titles of the tunes reflect the wild, surrealistic humor of the American frontier: "Tramp the Devil's Eyes Out," "Shoot the Turkey Buzzard," "Jay Bird Died with the Whooping Cough," "Throw the Old Cow over the Fence," "How Many Biscuits Can You Eat?" and "There Ain't No Bugs on Me." Often the fiddler would sing a stanza or two as he gave the "calls" for the dance:

*Come along boys, don't be so lazy.  
Dip that hunk in a whole lot of gravy.  
Rope the bell, bell the calf,  
Swing your corner once and a half.  
Treat 'em all alike.*

There were other stanzas that were interchangeable and that floated back and forth between fiddle tunes, depending on the mood and memory of the fiddler.

*Fly around my pretty little miss,  
Fly around, my daisy,  
Fly around, my pretty little miss,  
You almost drive me crazy.*

*My wife died Friday night, Saturday  
she was buried,  
Sunday was my courtin' day, Monday  
I got married.*

Some of the titles and stanzas were pretty earthy, full of *double-entendre* for those familiar with folk speech; titles like "Forky Deer" or "Clabber

Cod" are suggestive enough, but some fiddle-tune stanzas are even more explicit:

*Sally in the garden sifting, sifting,  
Sally in the garden, sifting sand,  
Sally in the garden sifting, sifting,  
Sally upstairs with a hog-eyed man.*

Old-timers today won't tell a stranger what "hog-eyed" means, but they grin when somebody asks them.

It was partly because of such frolics and tunes that many righteous folk considered the fiddle "the devil's box." When settlers and mountaineers embraced religion, they did so with a zest that nourished intolerance, and fiddling—long associated even in the Old World with frivolity and indolence (cf. the fable of the grasshopper and the ant, or the legends of Nero fiddling while Rome burned)—soon had a very negative image in some quarters. "The man who 'fiddled' was hardly worth the damning," asserts a southern mountain man in the 1887 local-color novel *Behind the Blue Ridge*, and a folklorist writing at the turn of the century noted: "Particularly does the devil ride upon a fiddlestick. People who think it a little thing to take a human life will shudder at the thought of dancing."

Some fiddlers got converted and gave up fiddling, but, unable to bring themselves to destroy their beloved fiddle, they concealed it in the walls of their cabin. Others turned to church music; a Kentucky fiddler recalled, "Once I got the Spirit here I gave up frolic tunes and played only religious music."

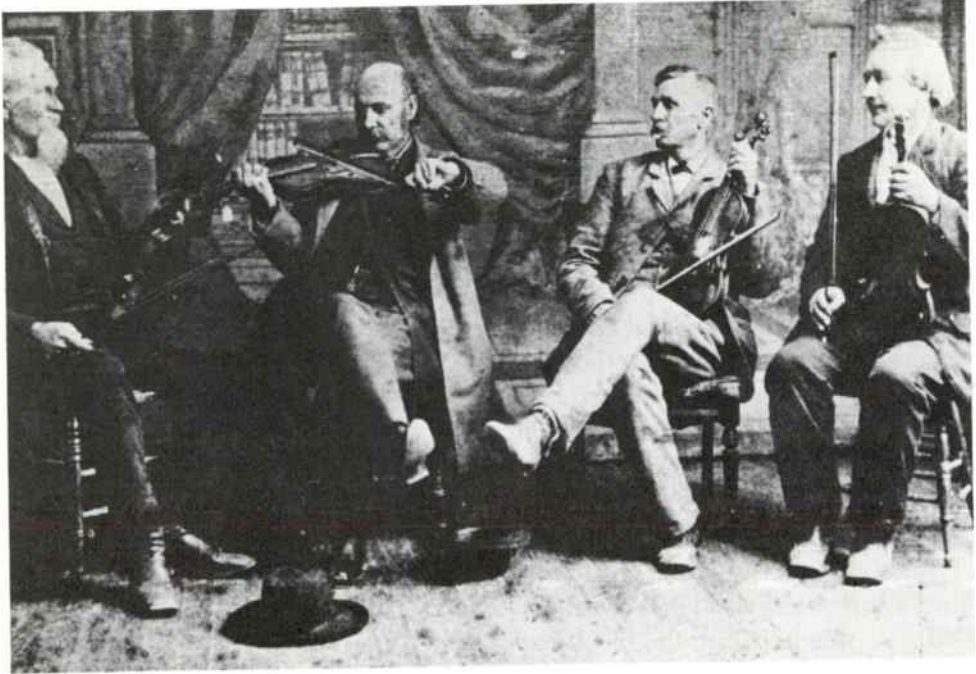
In spite of all this, the fiddler endeared himself to the American folk,

and fiddling has traditionally been associated with the classic American heroes. George Washington had his favorite tune ("Jaybird Sittin' on a Hickory Limb"), as did Thomas Jefferson ("Grey Eagle"). Davy Crockett was a fiddler, and Andrew Jackson's victory over the British in the War of 1812 is forever immortalized in fiddle standard, "The Eighth of January." Bob Taylor, one of the most popular politicians to be elected governor of Tennessee, played the fiddle on the campaign trail in the 1880s and asserted of the old fiddle tunes, "Every one of them breathes the spirit of liberty; every jig is an echo from flintlock rifles and shrill fifes of Bunker Hill. . . ." Henry Ford, the most popular folk hero of the early twentieth century, sponsored fiddling contests across the country and argued that old-time fiddling helped preserve American values. Politicians soon found that fiddling helped them win elections and helped mark them as true men of the people.

In truth, fiddling was a genuine folk art. While tunes were transmitted—and transmuted—a healthy folklore grew up about the fiddle itself. There was a lore about the proper way to make a fiddle, since many mountaineers and settlers had no other source; curly maple, poplar, and apple woods were popular in fiddle building, and horsehair was often strung for the bow. Many musicians also made it a point to know the history of their own fiddle if it had been passed down to them, and this lore became part of the fiddle culture. Rattlesnake rattles were said to improve the tone of the fiddle—especially if you had killed the snake

yourself. There was a lore about fiddle tunes, about where they were learned and what they meant, and even a lore about the great fiddlers: fiddlers who could play a thousand tunes, or who could play "triple stops" (sound three strings at once). A common tale even today tells of a "mystery fiddler" who shows up at a small local contest, speaks to no one, plays brilliantly, and vanishes into the night.

While dancing was the most common social event that featured fiddling, there soon developed another tradition that was to be of even more importance to the development of the music: the fiddling contest. Here groups of local fiddlers would meet together and compete with each other to determine who was the "best" fiddler. Often a prize was awarded, but many old-time fiddlers saw that as less important than the prestige attached to a contest. Fiddling was considered not so much a fine art as a manly skill, like shooting, boxing, or wrestling; many of the early fiddling contests were held in conjunction with shooting or wrestling contests at local fairs and celebrations. Well-known area "champion" fiddlers wore their reputations with the nervous aplomb of western gunfighters; there was always a brash youngster wanting to go up against the champion, and there was always the danger of the champion's age catching up with him. Some of the older contests were trials of endurance: One Texas contest at the turn of the century ran eight days. And both fiddlers and audience took the contests seriously; it was a matter of great local pride for a county to have a champion fiddler (even though



*Late nineteenth-century fiddle contest in Knoxville, Tennessee. The left-handed performer is Governor Robert L. Taylor. Courtesy Mrs. Lucille Boyd.*

the sobriquet "state champion" meant only that some promoter had decided to dignify his contest with the title).

Researcher Dick Hulan has recently found that the first documented fiddling contest dates from November 30, 1736, and was held in Hanover County, Virginia. The *Virginia Gazette* of the time reported that "some merry-dispos'd Gentlemen" had decided to celebrate St. Andrews' Day by staging a horse race and by offering a "fine *Cremona* Fiddle to be plaid for, by any Number of Country Fiddlers." Other events of the celebration included "Dancing, Singing, Football-play, Jumping, Wrestling, &c." and the awarding of "a fine Pair of Silk Stockings to be given to the *handsomest Maid* upon the Green, to be

judg'd of by the Company." The winner of this contest is unknown, but the "merry-dispos'd Gentlemen" must have had a good time, for they were back the next year (1737) with an even bigger contest. This contest promised a horse race, wrestling, and a dancing contest, and the promoters announced "that a violin be played for by 20 Fiddlers, and to be given to him that shall be adjudged the best; No Person to have the Liberty of playing, unless he brings a Fiddle with him. After the Prize is won, they are all to play together, and each a different Tune; and to be treated by the Company." Singing got into the act this year with the announcement that "a *Quire of Ballads*" would be "sung for, by a Number of Songsters; the

best Songster to have the Prize, and all of them to have Liquor sufficient to clear their Wind-Pipes." After the contest, the *Gazette* was able to report that "the whole was managed with as good Order, and gave as great Satisfaction, in general, as cou'd possible be expected."

Fiddling contests of various sorts continued throughout the nineteenth century, but did not become widely popular until after 1865 or so. Often they were held at one-room mountain schoolhouses or at the county seat when people came into town for the circuit-court meetings. The judges were often local prominent citizens, though on occasion other fiddlers judged. Most of the time a fiddler was expected to "whup it out by hisself," standing alone on the stage and playing solo, with no guitar or banjo backup man. In some early contests, every fiddler had to play the same tune, often a common one known by all, such as "Arkansas Traveler" or "Sally Goodin." In today's contests, fiddlers are expected to be creative as well as technically proficient, but in older contests, the prize often went to the person who played in the most authentic style. If a fiddler was suspected of having any formal training, he was disqualified.

Fiddling contests worked because the fiddle was the most common folk instrument of the nineteenth century and because many of the standard fiddle tunes were well known to audiences and musicians alike. A fiddler might learn an occasional new tune at a contest, but by and large the music he heard was as familiar and as comfortable as an old shoe, and it

served to reaffirm both his aesthetic and his social values.

In the smaller, local contests at the grass-roots level, the prizes did not always include much cash; it was common for local merchants to contribute goods as well. As late as 1931, a local Tennessee contest announced that prizes included "such handy and useful articles as fountain pens, flour, shirts, pocket knives, inner tubes,

*Tennessee's famous Taylor brothers, Alf (Republican) and Bob (Democrat), ran against each other in 1886 in the famous "War of the Roses." Both were skilled fiddlers from eastern Tennessee, and though they probably didn't actually fiddle for votes from the platform, both used fiddling to endear themselves to a grass-roots audience—a practice to be followed by generations of later politicians in the South. Courtesy Tennessee State Archive.*



rocking chairs, rubber heels, cigars, gasoline, shotgun shells, cigarettes, coffee . . . talking machine records, candy, cow feed, neckties, half soles, cakes, hair tonic, flashlights, pencils, and water glasses.”

An important element of the fiddling contests—then as now—was nostalgia. Many Americans somehow associated fiddling with “the good old days,” patriotism, and old-fashioned American values. A newspaper account of an 1891 contest mentioned that each fiddler “played the sweet old tunes of bygone time with charmed bow string.” A 1909 account quotes a fiddler in a contest as bragging that he is playing his “great-grandfather’s pieces.” It was partially this element of nostalgia that was responsible for the growth and commercialization of these fiddling contests.

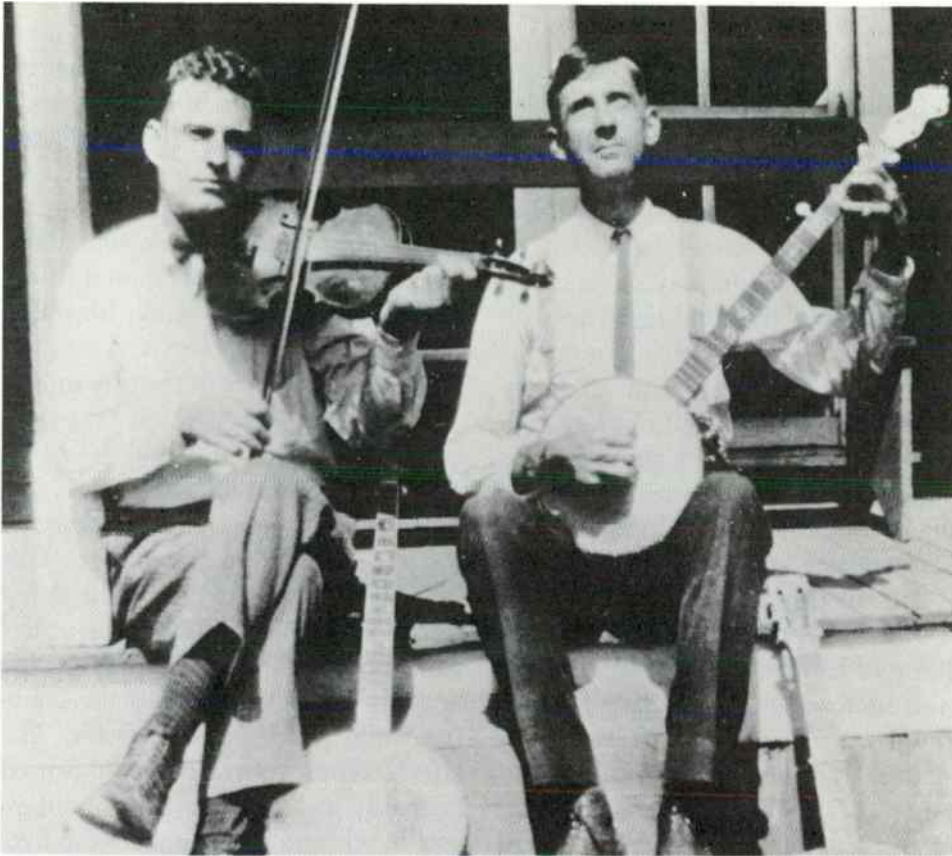
By the end of the nineteenth century, cities like Knoxville, Tennessee, and Atlanta, Georgia, were holding regular fiddling conventions that attracted scores of talented musicians from a radius of a hundred miles. The Atlanta Fiddlers’ Convention—which was to play an important role in the development of the early country music recording industry in Atlanta—dates from 1913, while the country’s most famous annual contest, that at Union Grove, North Carolina, dates from 1924. Though the contests often included other categories of musical competition such as singing, string-band playing, banjo picking, and “clog” or “buck” dancing, the fiddling remained at the center of the event: It always offered the most prize money, attracted the most contes-

tants, and was regarded the most seriously.

As fiddling developed throughout the nineteenth century, it was exposed to influences other than the Scots-Irish-English fiddling styles. In Texas and the Southwest, Spanish and Mexican styles were much in evidence, and in Louisiana Cajun fiddlers developed a distinctive use of high droning sounds. American Indian fiddlers brought a new sense of timing and harmonics to fiddling; Cherokee and Choctaw Indians living in the mountainous Southeast exchanged songs and ideas with white settlers in the area. Slave fiddling was rather common in some parts of the South, and there are numerous accounts of slaves fiddling for their masters’ dancing parties. On their own time, black fiddlers experimented with sliding notes and unorthodox tunings, and devised their own instrumental styles, which were not exactly hillbilly and not exactly blues.

Fiddle music came out of the nineteenth century as the dominant instrumental music in the southern mountains and in rural America generally. It was gradually to be replaced by the guitar as the major symbol of country music, but for decades the fiddle carried the instrumental burden of American folk music. There is something archetypal about the fiddle, something that suggests not only the music it made but also the values of those who listened to the music.

The assault on the fiddle’s supremacy in folk music actually began with the growing popularity of other stringed instruments in the late nine-



*Burnett and Rutherford (fiddle), one of the first groups to record in the archaic banjo-fiddle style, which evolved in the mountains before the advent of the guitar. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*

teenth century. The first such instrument was the banjo, which has been called "the outstanding American contribution to the music of folklore." In reality, the banjo was of African origin and was almost certainly brought to the New World by slaves; throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the banjo, or *banza*, was associated almost exclusively with black musicians. Slave banjos were usually made from gourds and were reported in Maryland as early as 1774.

Thomas Jefferson, writing in 1781 about the blacks on his own plantation, remarked that "the instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa." Another writer about the same time listened to a black singer accompany himself on the banjo, and a novel published in 1832 described a banjo player who could improvise songs on the spot or sing requested numbers, and who was as much at home playing for slave dancing as serenading the young la-

dies of his master's household. By 1847 we have accounts of a Negro dance that featured the music of banjos and fiddles being played together. In fact, the stereotype of the happy, fun-loving Negro playing the banjo was so established by midcentury that a foreign visitor would report, in all seriousness, that runaway slaves could be lured from their hiding place in a forest by the sound of banjo music.

The black folk tradition gradually transferred the banjo into white folk tradition, especially in the southern Appalachians, where musicians made banjos out of ground-hog skins and adapted their songs to the limitations of the instrument's harmonics, but at this time a parallel commercial tradition of banjo music that was to have even more effect on modern country music was also developing. This commercial tradition began with a "whitening" of black banjo songs. In the 1790s a Boston musician named Graupner heard a group of blacks in Charleston playing the banjo and singing to its accompaniment. He bought a banjo, learned to play it, wrote down some of the tunes, and in 1799 wrote the first "minstrel" song, "The Gay Negro Boy." The minstrel show developed as a major form of entertainment in the 1840s and established its basic format of white professional performers dressing as blacks and singing arranged songs that were supposedly derived from genuine "plantation melodies." The banjo became a central symbol of the minstrel show and of its stereotyped image of the black. The popular songs of Stephen Foster, songs like

"Ring, Ring the Banjo," helped feed this stereotype. As the minstrel show gave way to vaudeville, the popularity of the banjo with white entertainers grew even more, but the racial connotations of the banjo were passed on also, and the 1880s saw a boom in lively banjo-thumping singers doing "coon" songs—songs composed in deliberate parody of black lifestyles. Many of these songs survived into the early commercial era of country music.

The person who perhaps best typifies the commercial banjo tradition was a Virginia man named Joe Sweeney, who supposedly "invented" the five-string banjo about 1830. This fifth string, a drone or thumb string higher in pitch than any of the others and fastened by a peg halfway up the neck, is what distinguished the country banjo from its city cousin. The latter has only four strings, and is used primarily as a rhythm instrument in jazz bands and dance bands; the five-string can be picked, and is often used as a solo instrument.

While Sweeney may have added the fifth string, the idea of a thumb string probably originated with black folk musicians, who sometimes used three strings with a fourth thumb string. Sweeney, however, did a lot to popularize the banjo and its music. He wrote many songs based on genuine black folk melodies he heard on his plantation. Billed as "The Banjo King," he toured through the South and made a hit on the New York stage (he even got to give a command performance for Queen Victoria in England). During all these performances he impressed many musicians

both in the North and the South, with the potential of the banjo as a serious instrument, and by the 1850s, banjos were being manufactured and merchandised, a sure sign that the white lower-middle class was accepting the instrument.

Many of the performing styles of the nineteenth-century stage—from minstrel shows to vaudeville—were picked up by amateur musicians across the South and fed back into the folk tradition. Soon the solo fiddler at country dances was joined by a banjo player, and two thirds of the classic country string band was established.

The last third of the string band, the guitar, actually has a longer pedigree than the banjo, but it was accepted as an American folk instrument much later than was the banjo. It is perhaps fitting that the guitar, like the country music it has come to symbolize, was the product of two traditions: the popular commercial one and the folk-transmission process. Given the lack of informants to describe the folk processes of the nineteenth century, the commercial tradition is, naturally, better documented.

While the banjo was being played almost exclusively by blacks in the South, the guitar was recognized as a “proper” parlor instrument for the cultured upper classes of the North. An import from London drawing rooms, the guitar was seen as a link with Old World culture, and its early players included notables like Ben Franklin and Francis Hopkinson, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Instruction books like *The American Guitarist* were appear-

ing by the 1830s, and a number of American “classical” guitarists made names for themselves on the concert stage.

By 1833, C. F. Martin had started making the guitars that would eventually have a legendary reputation among country pickers, but for much

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*An anonymous musician, Bristol, Tennessee, 1891. The relationship between the pistol and the home-made fretless banjo remains a mystery. Courtesy Herb Peck.*





of the nineteenth century, the guitar tradition was confined to the cultured classes; it was only in the 1880s and 1890s that the parlor tradition began to filter down to the lower middle classes. By this time the light classical and semiclassical numbers of the earlier repertoire had given way to more popular compositions for guitar—numbers with titles like “Siege of Sebastopol,” “Wild Rose Medley,” and “Midnight Fire Alarm.” These specific compositions for guitar had a pronounced influence on playing technique (such as thumb picking) and tuning patterns. Guitar historian Robert Fleder has pointed out, for instance, that the open D tuning of a piece like “Siege of Sebastopol” (1880) soon became popular even in folk tradition. Even today, black guitarists across the country call the D tuning “Vastopol.”

By the turn of the century, the class diffusion of the guitar was well under way. In 1902, the Gibson Company—a name soon to be as revered as that of Martin by country pickers—began manufacturing mandolins and guitars, and shortly thereafter embarked on an orchestrated campaign to get its instruments, “The Musical Pals of the Nation,” into every town. Gibson sponsored various mandolin and string orchestras everywhere, and printed pictures of them in their catalogues, proclaiming “Every one a ‘Gibsonite.’” The mandolin and guitar societies, however, were still the provinces of the middle class; it took Sears to change that. As early as 1894 Sears was offering as many as seven guitar models in its annual catalogue, along with instruction books and even books

of popular vocal songs arranged for guitar accompaniment. By 1909 Sears’ guitar line had grown to twelve models, indicating the success it was having with its cheap mass-market guitars. And cheap they were: The lowest-priced (“The Serenata”) sold for about two dollars, while the cheapest Gibson cost well over one hundred. The guitar, unlike the banjo, was not easily homemade, and so a readily available source like Sears was important in making the guitar a folk instrument. The popular vogue for Hawaiian music in the era between 1890 and 1910 fueled added interest in the guitar, and especially in the use of the “steel” guitar.

Soon amateur string bands began to crop up in all sorts of rural settings, both north and south. Old photos show mandolin and guitar bands from Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, North Dakota, and even upstate New York. Fiddlers, of course, were as ubiquitous as ever. The bands played rags, waltzes, polkas, schottisches, and even jazz, and for a time were a staple of rural lower middle class life. Sears catalogues went everywhere into rural America, and people who couldn’t afford even a Sears model soon figured out how to build their own.

It was in the South, though, that this rural string tradition sank its deepest roots, and it was in the South where it was subjected to the commercial impetus that was to forge it into a popular art form called country music. The popular commercial guitar tradition especially had a substantial impact on the music of the South. After all, the first guitar manual in the country was printed in South Caro-

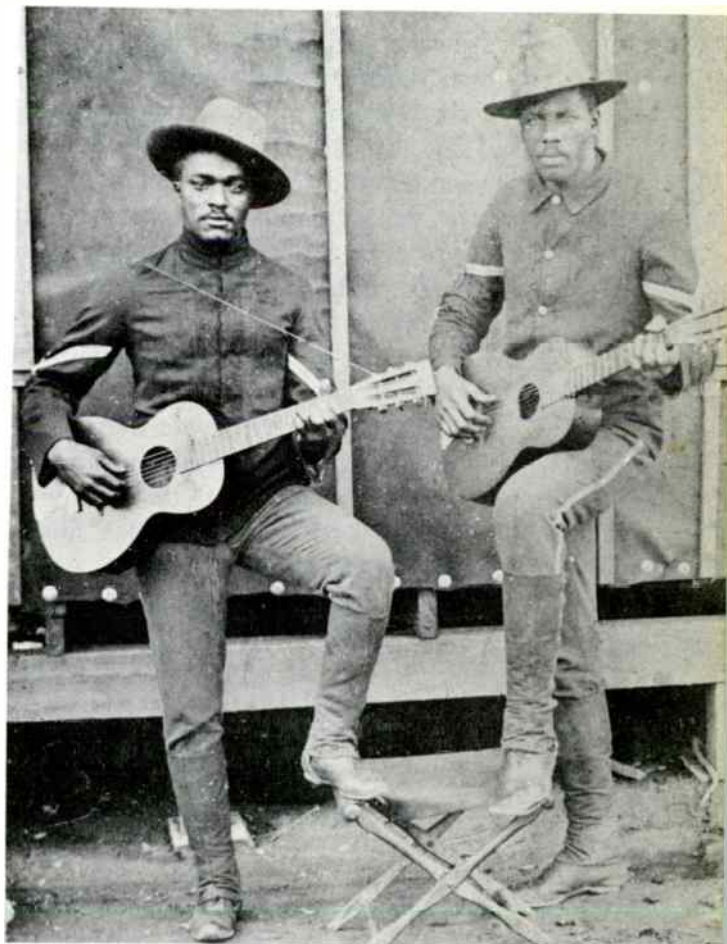
lina in 1820, and though the various mandolin and guitar societies have been traditionally associated with large northern cities, the Gibson catalogues reveal that such orchestras existed across the South in cities like Knoxville, Macon (Georgia), Memphis, Houston, Jackson (Mississippi), and Atlanta. During the Spanish-American War and World War I, southern soldiers were exposed even more to the guitar. This double movement of the guitar into the working classes and into rural America reinforced the existing folk traditions and soon made the guitar immensely popular.

The folk (as opposed to classical) traditions of guitar music stemmed from two sources: the Mexican music of the Southwest and the black blues and ragtime music of the South. In Spanish America and Mexico the guitar was as ubiquitous as it was in the mother country, and as Anglo-Saxon settlers moved into Texas, New Mexico, and California, they found the Mexican settlers living there playing guitars. American cowboys learned from their Spanish and Mexican counterparts that the guitar was good company on the lonely prairies and long cattle drives, and by 1900 the guitar had established itself in the Southwest as an appropriate partner for the fiddle at local dances.

Though guitars were almost certainly known in rural areas of the South before World War I, many old-time musicians insist that they never saw a guitar before this time; furthermore, many of them recall that when they saw their first guitar, it was in the hands of a black musician. Folklorist

Alan Lomax, one of the first trained scholars to pay attention to folk instrumental styles, recalls: "Negroes introduced the guitar and the blues into the hills sometime after the turn of the century, so recently in fact that the most complex of hillbilly guitar styles is still called 'nigger pickin'.'"

*Two anonymous black musicians in Spanish-American War uniforms. One theory on the popularization of the guitar in southern folk music suggests that the instrument was imported by returning veterans of the Cuban war. Courtesy Herb Peck and Charles Wolfe.*



There are few written records to indicate how the guitar got into black folk tradition, but it did, and black singers soon adapted it to their blues style. While at first the white country guitarists played little more than rhythm behind their singing, the black country blues singers had devised ways to punctuate their singing with melodies too. They used the index and middle fingers to pick on the high strings, while the thumb kept up a steady rhythm on the bass strings. It wasn't long, however, before white country guitarists adopted this same style, and the guitar became the third instrument of the basic country band.

By the end of World War I, all the diverse ingredients of modern country music were securely established in rural southern life. The old ballad singers had Americanized their British models and developed a thriving native ballad tradition; semiprofessional musicians in vaudeville shows, circuses, and medicine shows were exposing rural and southern audiences to popular music of the day, from the sticky sentimental laments to the rough-hewn minstrel parodies; gospel publishing houses were encouraging the performance and the writing of new gospel songs, while singing schools and conventions kept the older church music alive; country fiddlers were moving out of the exhausting drudgery of night-long mountain dances and into the limelight of the fiddling contest where audiences were listening with a new attentiveness; the classic string band of fiddle, banjo, and guitar was becoming the standard instrumental combination, and ama-

teur pickers across the South were busy exploring the limitations and possibilities of the string-band format.

These elements had already shown a healthy tendency to overlap when a song called "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" came upon the scene. It had been written and published in 1871 by Will Hays, a Kentucky riverman who had a long and successful career grinding out songs for the vaudeville stage. It was one of his biggest hits, and was sung widely throughout the country as a pop song. The tune and idea, however, had appealed to the folk imagination, for soon settlers in the West were singing a version called "My Little Old Sod Shanty on the Plains" and railroad men were singing another version called "The Little Red Caboose Behind the Train." To complicate matters more, a Salvation Army hymn-writer named Charles W. Fry had grafted a gospel lyric to the tune in 1881; this new hymn was popularized widely in an 1887 edition of Ira Sankey's *Gospel Hymns Number 5* under the now-famous title, "Lily of the Valley." Thus Hays's song had started in the pop tradition, moved into folk tradition, and even into gospel tradition.

And, perhaps symbolically, it became the first country song to be recorded. In 1923 the Okeh Phonograph Corporation, as a favor to a client, recorded a fifty-five-year-old fiddler from Fannin County, Georgia, named Fiddlin' John Carson. On his record, Carson combined two of the most important nineteenth-century performing traditions: the solo fiddle and the

vocal. He sang in a rough, untutored voice, and played the fiddle simultaneously. And his two selections reflected two song traditions: "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" was of course from the pop-vaudeville tradition, while the other side, "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow," was probably an old minstrel song that had gone into folk tra-

dition. The record, in short, was a perfect symbol of the diverse strains of nineteenth-century music merging under the pressure of the new mass media. But the executives of the Okeh Phonograph Corporation didn't see all this at the time; they thought Carson's singing was "pluperfect awful." They were sure that the record wouldn't amount to anything.

# *The Birth of an Industry*

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To the men from New York, Bristol in the summer of 1927 must have seemed quaint, provincial, and remote. Located high in the Appalachians between the Cumberland Plateau and the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, Bristol straddled the Tennessee-Virginia border; State Street, the town's main street, was literally the state line.

For years musicians from the nearby hills used the town as an informal gathering place. They would come down in wagons, on horseback, in model A Fords, even on foot; they would attend fiddling contests, have dances, gossip, and listen to the latest records played on the Victrolas local merchants would wheel out on the sidewalk in front of their stores. Not that there was much to interest the hill people on early Victrola records: most of the sides were dance-band

music, the likes of Paul Whiteman's "Love Nest" or Zez Confrey's "Kitten on the Keys," or the Scots songs of Harry Lauder, or the vaudeville fare of Al Jolson. Some of the newfangled "blues" songs by Bessie Smith weren't so bad, but most of the hill people listened to the demonstration records out of simple fascination with the gimmickry of the thing; few of them toted any of the Paul Whitemans or Al Jolsons home with them.

Bristol had already enjoyed a reputation as a center for old-time folk music. Ten years earlier, in 1917, noted English folk-song collector Cecil Sharp had visited the region and had found that the mountains in the area were full of singers who knew old English folk ballads dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Now, in late July of 1927, another folk-song collector of a slightly differ-

ent type was arriving from New York. Where Sharp went about his work with notepad and good faith, this new collector was using a new electric recording machine and a file of contracts.

The “collector” was a young, moon-faced man named Ralph Peer, and his plan was not to collect material for some distinguished university archive but to make commercial phonograph records for the Victor Company. When he drove into Bristol he had with him his wife, two engineers, and half a carload of portable recording equipment. Peer rented an empty building on State Street—it was an old hat factory—and his engineers set out to fix it up as a temporary studio. Blankets were hung around the walls for sound baffles, and a six-foot platform was erected to hold the recording turntable. The crew worked for a couple of days getting the temporary

studio in shape and then took a break for the weekend to look over the town. They found a pleasant city of over eight thousand people, in a strange mixture of rural and urban culture. Some aspects of the city were right out of the recent best sellers by Sinclair Lewis: two newspapers full of wire-service reports, a super-active Kiwanis Club, a YMCA, an emerging upper middle class that dabbled in the bullish 1927 stock market, and a fancy new hotel—with a hot jazz band. Peer saw at once that his musicians would have to come out of the nearby hills, not out of the town. He also saw he had to justify his interest in “hill country” tunes to the newly sophisticated townsmen. Thus in the Sunday morning paper, Peer planted a news story that explained his mission:

Mountain singers and entertainers will be the talent used for record making in



Bristol. Several well-known native record makers will come to Bristol this week to record. Mr. Peer has spent some time selecting the best native talent. The mountain or "hillbilly" records of this type have become more popular and are in great demand all over the country at this time. They are practically all made in the South.

In no section of the South have the prewar melodies and old mountaineer songs been better preserved than in the mountains of East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, experts declare, and it was primarily for this reason that the Victor Company chose Bristol as its operating base.

Peer had been through Bristol in the spring of 1927 and had auditioned several possible groups for recording; he lined these up to record during his first few days in town, and hoped that the publicity would attract other musicians from the surrounding hills. On Monday Peer began recording Ernest "Pop" Stoneman and his family, one of the "well-known native record makers" (and a family that was to endure into the present country-music era), and he deliberately let the word get out that Stoneman was not only making records, but also that he was getting paid for it—to the tune of a hundred dollars a day. The people of the town were astounded that people would pay to hear hillbilly music—but the aspiring musicians in the area were even more astounded, and they swarmed into Bristol looking for "the record man."

"I was deluged with long-distance telephone calls from the surrounding mountain region," Peer recalled. "Groups of singers who had not visited



*Ralph Peer.* Courtesy Charles Wolfe.

Bristol during their entire lifetime arrived by bus, horse and buggy, trains, or on foot." Relatives of informants who had sung freely and innocently for Cecil Sharp ten years earlier now had a burning desire to see their names on a Victrola disc. The commercialization of mountain folk music had come, and it had come with a bewildering suddenness.

At the center of the new hillbilly boom he had described for the local paper was Ralph Peer himself, and behind this watershed Bristol field trip was a fascinating four-year struggle to get early country music inserted into the channels of modern mass media. In a very real sense, Ralph Peer had grown up with the commercial record-

ing industry. He was born in 1892 in Kansas City, where he spent his youth helping his father manage a store that sold sewing machines, pianos, and the then-new home phonograph machines. Before World War I Peer had gone to work for Columbia Records, working in a variety of positions and learning the ins and outs of the new record business. One early artist he worked with was W. C. Handy, famous composer of "St. Louis Blues." By the end of the war, Peer had joined the General Phonograph Corporation, a fairly new company that had just decided to start a record label called Okeh.

During this time the record industry was booming; major companies like Victor were reporting record sales of over one hundred million records in 1921. Most of these records, of course, were vaudeville songs, band music, light classics, and samples of a strange new instrumental cacophony called jazz. Compared to the major companies like Victor, Columbia, and Edison, Okeh was insignificant, with sales of only three million to four million records a year. Naturally, the company was looking for ways to increase sales. To make matters worse, a depression in 1921 crippled much of the entertainment industry; and worse still, by 1922 radio was becoming popular. Radio could offer sound reproduction comparable to that of many of the primitive acoustic records as played on windup Victrolas, and radio was much less expensive. Columbia's sales dropped off over 50 per cent just between 1921 and 1922; other companies had similar losses. The record

market seemed to be drying up, and any new ideas were welcomed.

One of these ideas was to create records that would appeal to a specialized, as opposed to a general, audience. For some time the record companies had produced ethnic records in various "foreign" series for sale overseas and to various ethnic immigrant groups in large northern U.S. cities. Peer was aware of this type of marketing, and so he was interested when he noticed that a recording he had helped supervise in 1920, Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," was having fantastic sales in the black sections of northern cities. Mamie Smith was one of the first black blues singers to record, and Peer sensed that such records could be marketed to the vast black population. Thus by mid-1921 the Okeh Company had initiated a special "race" series of records, a series designed to appeal to a black audience. Other companies soon followed, and blues became a lucrative part of the record business.

Peer decided to try a further appeal to specialized markets and determined to appeal to regional markets by doing a series of recordings "on location." Peer set out using some newly designed portable recording equipment and working with recording pioneer Charles Hibbard, a onetime associate of Thomas Edison himself. Peer asked his regional distributors to help round up local talent—jazz bands, church singers, amateur violinists, anybody popular on the local scene. June 1923 found him in Atlanta, where his local distributor, a furniture dealer named Polk C. Brockman, paraded his finds





*Artist Tom Wilson did this rendition of an early field-recording session for the Columbia LP Robert Johnson, Vol. II. Courtesy CBS.*

before the microphones. Peer later recalled:

See, everything I recorded he agreed to buy, I don't know, two thousand records or something, just to make it worthwhile. Finally there was this deal where he wanted me to record a singer from a local church. . . . This fellow had quite a good reputation and occasionally worked on the radio. So, we set a date with this fellow . . . and he just couldn't make the date. So to take up that time, my distributor brought in Fiddlin' John Carson. He said, Fiddlin' John had been on the radio station and he's got quite a following, he's not really a good singer, but let's see what it is. So the beginning of the hillbilly was just this effort to take up some time. . . . I can't claim there was any genius connected with it . . . not on my part, not on his part.

Because Brockman had placed an advanced order for the Carson records, Peer went ahead and pressed them, though he thought John's archaic folk-styled singing was "pluperfect awful." Peer saw the job as a custom pressing, and didn't even give the record a catalogue number. Brockman received the records in Atlanta a month later, and took them with him to a local fiddling contest; there Fiddlin' John himself came onstage and played "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow." Then Brockman put a windup phonograph machine onstage and played the same tunes as John had put them on record a month before. Brockman recalled, "We sold them just like hotcakes—right there in the hall. . . . That was the daddy of them. That was it."

Brockman reordered records from Peer in New York—and then reordered again. Finally the record was given a catalogue number, and Peer quickly made arrangements to record more of Carson. He sensed the presence of yet another vast, untapped record audience: the white, middle-class South. And, taking his cue from his experience with the "race" series, he set out to find the specialized music that appealed to this new audience.

Thus Fiddlin' John Carson's "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" became the first real "country" record and the first real "country" hit. To be sure, there had been earlier occasional attempts to record rural music. There had been occasional cylinder recordings of comedy-fiddle pieces like "Arkansas Traveler" and a few fiddle records such as John Taylor's "Devil's Dream Reel" for Victor as early as 1909. Charles Ross Taggart's "The Old Country Fiddler" pieces had been popular in the teens, and in 1922 Victor had recorded a couple of Texas fiddlers named Eck Robertson and Galliland. But the companies had seen these as novelty pieces and had not tried to market them to any specific audience. They certainly started no trend, as did Carson's (and, indeed, Victor didn't even release the 1922 Robertson sides until after the success of Carson's record). Carson's was the first conscious, deliberate attempt to program a music toward the traditional country-music audience. Carson, like many pioneer country-recording artists, had actually been performing for years at local fairs, carnivals, and political rallies, and he simply transferred this performing style



*One of the first pieces of sheet music stimulated by a country-music recording.*  
 Courtesy Charles Wolfe.

to the new mass media of records and radio. In Carson's case, his reputation as a colorful entertainer had won him an invitation to broadcast on Atlanta radio in 1922, and his success on radio had a lot to do with his getting a chance to record. Much of the time, though, he used radio merely to publicize his personal appearances, and he looked on records in the same way: His touring car proudly bore the words, "Recording Artist." (In this respect he was like many of the early hillbilly performers who used mass media as a tool, a means to an end.)

Carson himself went on to have a long and successful career in music, recording dozens of times with his band, the Virginia Reelers, and with his daughter, an insouciant comedienne named Moonshine Kate. John's

songs were as colorful as his life: "If You Can't Get the Stopper Out Break the Neck," "You Can't Get Milk from a Cow Named Ben," "Who Bit the Wart Off Grandma's Nose?" "It's a Shame to Whip Your Wife on Sunday," and "What You Gonna Do When Your Licker Runs Out?" On a more serious side, John sang a number of very popular sentimental songs, like "You'll Never Miss Your Mother Till She's Gone," and even a few topical political songs such as "The Farmer Is the Man That Feeds Them All" and "Georgia's Three-dollar Tag" (about a license-tag controversy). Carson stopped recording in 1934, and spent his later years as the elevator operator at the Georgia State Capitol, a job given him by Governor Herman Talmadge, for whom he had campaigned. Carson died in 1949, a patriarch who had received at least some recognition for his role in transforming American popular music.

John's success inspired not only Peer but the other major record companies as well. Within a year several semiprofessional southern musicians gained status as recording stars. A millhand from Fries, Virginia, named Henry Whitter had the second country best seller in "The Wreck of the Old 97" and "Lonesome Road Blues." Whitter, who sang and accompanied himself with guitar and harmonica (using a wire rack), had actually recorded his songs before Carson's discovery, but the company had refused to release them. A fellow millworker of Whitter, Ernest Stoneman, heard Whitter's records, decided he could sing better, and soon found himself with a successful re-

coding of a classic country ballad, "The Sinking of the *Titanic*." Also from Virginia came the Fiddlin' Powers Family to record fiddle tunes for Victor, while the northern Georgia team of Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett did the same for Columbia. Peer returned to Atlanta to find the Jenkins Family, the archetype of hundreds of modern country gospel groups, who were immensely successful on records and radio—and as songwriters. Samantha Bumgartner and Eva Davis, two young ladies from North Carolina who recorded with fiddle and banjo, became the first female country stars. Vocalion Records brought to New York from Tennessee three veteran minstrels—George Reneau, Charlie Oaks, and banjo-thumping Uncle Dave Macon—to record mountain ballads and old vaudeville songs. Though most of this first generation of country entertainers was from the Southeast, Okeh recorded a group called Chenoweth's Cornfield Symphony Orchestra from Dallas—the first Texas country band to be recorded—in 1924. By the end of 1924 the first country record catalogue had been issued by Columbia records: *Familiar Tunes on Fiddle, Guitar, Banjo, Harmonica, and Accordion*, designed to list the records of musicians whose "names are best known where the square dance has not been supplanted by the fox-trot."

Thus by early 1925—barely eighteen months after Carson's pioneering recording—most of the major record companies were so successful with this new type of record that they were establishing separate series of "hill-billy" recordings designed to feature

rural southern artists and to be distributed and sold primarily in the South. Nobody, however, knew exactly what to call this music: some of it was genuine folk music, but a lot of it was comprised of old sentimental songs, old popular songs, and old vaudeville tunes. The different companies came up with an interesting variety of names. The Okeh Company called their product "Old-time Tunes;" Columbia chose "Familiar Tunes—Old and New"; other companies chose names like "Songs from Dixie," "Old Southern Tunes," and "Old Familiar Tunes and Novelties." When Sears got into the business and began to sell this music through their catalogues, they listed it as "Southern Fiddling and Song Records," "Mountain Ballads," and "Old-time Southern Songs."

In this early period, the term "country music" was never used, though Peer himself used the term "hill country music" as early as 1925, and Ward's catalogue listed the music as "Hill Country Melodies." Many Northerners persisted in using the term "hillbilly" to describe the music, though the term had very negative connotations for most rural Southerners. A 1926 writer for *Variety*, the show-business newspaper, discussed "hill-billy music" and explained that "the 'hill-billy' is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the chautauqua, and the phonograph." They had, according to *Variety*, "the intelligence of morons" and delighted in "sing-song, nasal-twangling vocalizing." However, partly because of the

success of an early string band that appealed to vaudeville audiences by playing up their hayseed image and calling themselves The Hill-Billies, the adjective "hillbilly" gradually became attached to the music in the early 1930s. Today the term "hillbilly" is seldom used, and it is as offensive to a modern white country musician as the term "nigger" is to a modern black man. Its frequent use by northern recording executives in the early days reflects the fact that they looked down on the music and endured it only because it made money for them.

Many of this first generation of

country performers were amateur or semiprofessional southern musicians, and many of them had been brought North to record in New York studios. Peer's occasional forays into the field were not emulated much by other companies; it was easier for them to record in permanent studios. But to do this, the companies had to locate genuine southern musicians, talk them into coming North, and take care of them as they wandered about the big city. Many of these musicians had rather limited repertoires, and some found it hard to learn new tunes. Ernest "Pop" Stoneman was very popular with the companies, for instance,

*The Stoneman Family. Pop Stoneman is standing behind his fiddler wife. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*



because he could learn new songs easily and thus could produce “cover” versions of hit records.

An ideal solution to this problem was for the companies to find a way to combine the authentic elements of southern music with the professionalism of northern studio musicians. In one case, at least, these qualities were brought together in the person of country music’s first superstar, Vernon Dalhart.

Dalhart—his real name was Marion Try Slaughter—was an East Texas native who had come to New York in 1912 to try to make it as a popular stage singer. He enjoyed moderate success at this, and was recording non-country songs as early as 1916, often specializing in “coon” songs in which he imitated black dialect. Because his pop career was on the decline, Dalhart decided to try to aim a record at the newly defined country market: He thus became the first pop singer to undergo the “Nashville treatment,” whereby an artist tries to shore up a sagging pop career by “going country.” Dalhart chose to cover Henry Whitter’s hit “Wreck of the Old 97” and finally persuaded Victor to let him record it. For the B side, he chose a lonesome dirge called “The Prisoner’s Song”; this tune, with its now-famous line, “Oh if I had the wings of an angel,” was apparently written by Dalhart’s cousin Guy Massey and Victor’s sophisticated musical director, Nat Shilkret. It was hardly a folk song, but it sounded like one, and it soon went into folk tradition. And no wonder; the Victor pairing became country music’s first million-selling record, and was so suc-

cessful that it was rerecorded on as many as fifty different labels over the next two decades. Dalhart had succeeded in shoring up his career in spectacular fashion.

During the rest of the 1920s, Dalhart produced an amazing string of hits: there were old sentimental songs from the nineteenth century like “The Letter Edged in Black” and “Little Rosewood Casket”; there were genuine folk songs like “Golden Slippers” and “Barbara Allen”; there were new Tin Pan Alley rustic-flavored songs like “My Blue Ridge Mountain Home” and “The Convict and the Rose.” But best of all, there were the event songs, topical songs about a tragedy, a murder case, or a famous criminal. Frank Walker, who supervised Dalhart’s recording of dozens of such songs for Columbia Records, recalled:

An event song is something that had happened, not today, maybe years ago, but hadn’t permeated through the South because of a lack of newspapers and no radio and no television in those days, but they had heard of it. For instance, some of the biggest sellers we were ever able to bring out was things like “The Sinking of the *Titanic*.” Bring out a record after it happened and tell a story with a moral. “The Sinking of the *Titanic*” was a big seller, but there was a little bit of a moral that people shouldn’t believe that they could build a ship that couldn’t be sunk. That’s the way they talked about it; of thinking God took it upon himself to show them that they couldn’t build anything greater than He could. Everything had a moral in the event songs.

Dalhart sung event songs about everything from the Scopes “monkey” trial to Lindbergh’s flying of the Atlantic, from the death of cave explorer Floyd Collins to the sinking of the submarine *S-5*, and from the exploits of Tennessee badman Kinnie Wagner to the California murder of Little Marian Parker. Though these event songs were all of contemporary composition, they were part of a long and noble folk-ballad tradition dating back to seventeenth-century England, when “broadsides” of recent events were sold in the streets. Oddly enough, some of the record companies sensed this connection and used it to add a certain dignity to their “hillbilly” event songs. A 1925 Victor catalogue supplement, describing Dalhart’s “Death of Floyd Collins” disc, read:

Popular songs of recent American tragedies. They belong with the old-fashioned penny-ballad, hobo-song, or “come-all-ye.” The curious will note that they are even in the traditional “ballad” metre, the “common metre” of hymnodists. They are not productions of, or for, the cabaret or the vaudeville stage, but for the roundhouse, the watertank, the caboose, or the village fire-station. Both have splendid simple tunes, in which the guitar accompanies the voice, the violin occasionally adding pathos. These songs are more than things for passing amusement; they are chronicles of the time, by unlettered and never self-conscious chroniclers.

Perhaps the “unlettered and never self-conscious chroniclers” were not all *that* folksy: most of them had enough sense to copyright their event songs. There were some genuine folk

composers in the lot—men like Peer’s discovery, the Reverend Andrew Jenkins of Atlanta, a blind evangelist who wrote dozens of event songs, including “The Death of Floyd Collins,” to order. Jenkins (or “Blind Andy,” as he was billed on his own records) was able to synthesize older folk material with his own creative impulses to produce simple, moving songs that often were indistinguishable from American folk songs. Blind Andy was never much of a singer himself, but he found in Dalhart a superb interpreter of his work. This was yet another way in which Dalhart’s music represented the ideal compromise between southern authenticity and New York professionalism. In one sense, Jenkins was the first successful country songwriter, but he was soon emulated by other writers who copied his style and technique, especially with event songs. Kansas-born Carson J. Robison worked closely with Dalhart in producing songs like “My Blue Ridge Mountain Home,” and Robison had a number of his own records become popular; Memphis-born Bob Miller was an early A&R (Artist and Repertory) man for Columbia in the 1920s and wrote scores of popular songs, including “Eleven-cent Cotton and Forty-cent Meat” and “Twenty-one Years.” Though both men became skilled Tin Pan Alley songwriters, both saw their early products popularized by country singers. The fact that all three of these men could make their living primarily by songwriting shows how quickly the music was becoming professionalized.

There were few singers as skilled as Dalhart in interpreting old-time songs,

and though he recorded under dozens of pseudonyms, the companies soon realized they would have to find other ways to secure "authentic" material. The means for this came in 1925 when Western Electric engineers invented the new electrical recording process; this new "orthophonic" process yielded much sharper and louder sound reproduction and made it possible for a singer to be heard without bellowing his lungs out. More subtle singing and instrumental styles were possible, and for a music dominated by stringed instruments, like country music, the effect was considerable. Even more interesting, however, was the fact that the new electrical process meant that portable recording units were much more easily made, and once made they got much better sound in the field. Rather than have Dalhart try to imitate country singers, or try to transport authentic native singers to New York, it now became possible for the company to go to the singer and record him in his native South. By 1926, talent scouts were touring the South, driving across the dusty back roads in search of hill-country talent. Temporary recording studios were set up in towns and cities across the South, and the race was on.

Columbia and Victor soon emerged as the two dominant companies in the era of field recordings, probably due to their superb technology. Columbia had as its chief talent scout a man named Frank Walker. Walker's role in the development of early country music is almost as important as that of Peer; Walker pioneered recording techniques, invented ways to attract new talent, and found new ways to

merchandise his product. Walker, who remained active in the recording industry until his death in the 1960s, later played a key role in the recording career of Hank Williams. In the 1920s it was Walker who was scouring the backwoods South looking for music. "I rode horses into the woods to find people who were individualistic in their singing and who could project the true country flavor," he recalled.

Walker, and the men who followed in his footsteps—men like Art Satherly, Dick Yoynow, W. R. Calloway, and Eli Oberstein—seldom went wandering aimlessly. They established a

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*Carson J. Robison and Vernon Dalhart.*  
Courtesy Doug Green.

( S O N G )



Carson J. Robison      Vernon Dalhart



network of local contacts, usually men who were record dealers or radio-station operators, and these people referred likely prospects to them. Then a field unit would set up for a week or two in a nearby city and all the prospects from that area would be recorded. In an area especially rich in musicians, such as eastern Tennessee, advertisements for musicians to record were occasionally placed in local papers. Working in this way, record companies held field sessions at various southern cities, all the way from Ashland, Kentucky, to Richmond, Virginia, to Birmingham, Atlanta, and Memphis from 1926 to 1933.\* A by-product of these early field sessions was the preservation of many rare folk songs and fiddle tunes, but few of the recording companies were conscious of this noble aspect of their work: they recorded the songs for one reason and one reason only: to sell records and to make money.

Walker made Atlanta his base of operations and began to visit the city regularly twice a year. It wasn't long before his visits proved to him that one of the most popular and most authentic forms of old-time music was string-band music. When John Carson had played the fiddle, he had played it solo. The classic string-band form, on the other hand, combined all modes of old-time music: fiddle, banjo, guitar, and singing. A group called Henry Whitter's Virginia

\* One of these field sessions was held in Nashville in 1928 by Victor, thus becoming the first recording session in Nashville. Though several "Opry" artists were recorded, the expedition in general was a failure; nearly half the sides were never even released.

Breakdowners was probably the first string band to record in the classic style, but the records were hardly successful. Far more successful was an offshoot of the Virginia Breakdowners, a four-piece band from North Carolina and Virginia led by Al Hopkins, which recorded for Ralph Peer in 1925. The band had no name, so Peer dubbed them "The Hill-Billies." The name stuck, both to the band and to the music, and the group was soon recording widely, touring, and broadcasting over radio stations in Washington, D.C. The band was a highly commercial outfit, much given to gimmicks and vaudeville routines, yet it was home for a number of genuine folk musicians of considerable talent, including Civil War fiddler Uncle Am Stuart, early slide guitarist Frank Wilson, and mountain fiddler Charlie Bowman. The early string-band recordings, however, were marred somewhat by the limitations of the acoustic recording technique, and these early sides hardly captured the hard-driving excitement of a mountain string band. But by 1926, when Walker and his crew descended on Atlanta, the recording technology could meet the challenge of string-band music.

Atlanta had been an important center for old-time music since 1913, when the Georgia Old Time Fiddlers' Association organized and began sponsoring an annual fiddling contest. These contests quickly grew in prestige; in 1915 the *Atlanta Journal* editorialized:

In these russet festivals, the melodies of the Old South are awakened, and

the spirit of folklore comes back to flesh and blood. The life of mountain and meadow, of world-forgotten hamlets, of cabin firesides aglow with hickory logs, the life of a thousand elemental things grows vivid and tuneful. From every part of the State come the fiddlers, graybeards and striplings, some accompanied by their faithful "houn'" dogs, others bearing a week's rations strapped to their shoulders, and all asweat with ambition to play their best and win the championship. Unique in all things, Atlanta has nothing more distinctive than this.

A few years later poet Stephen Vincent Benét would immortalize one of these contests in the poem "The Mountain Whippoorwill." For many of the musicians in the area, these contests provided the first real forum for their music, the first hint that people would pay to hear such music, and the first vestiges of respectability for the music. John Carson had acquired his reputation at such contests prior to his radio and record work. In fact, when WSB radio started in Atlanta in 1922, it found an established pool of old-time music talent it could draw on. The climate established by the annual fiddling contest (which, incidentally, also included banjo picking, singing, flat-foot dancing, and string band categories), and the willingness of WSB to program old-time music, created a ready-made opportunity for the recording industry.

Two of the more popular musicians in town were a fiddling chicken farmer named Gid Tanner and a blind guitarist-singer named Riley Puckett. Tanner and Puckett had long been fixtures at the annual fiddling contest;



Riley Puckett. Courtesy Doug Green.

they had first teamed up at the 1916 contest, when they brought down the house with a version of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." Tanner was a big, red-faced man who was as famous a clown as a fiddler; "he could turn his head around like an owl," a friend recalled. (It is noteworthy that Tanner and Carson, as well as Uncle Dave Macon, perhaps the three most famous country performers of their day, were regarded by their contemporaries as musicians *and* comedians, with equal weighting to the two professions.) In 1924, just after Fiddlin' John Carson's first record became a hit, Tanner and Puckett had gone north to record some of their old-time and vaudeville tunes.

Walker noticed that these two performers were immensely popular with Atlanta audiences, and he knew that

their early records had been moderately successful. He also noticed that another local act, a band led by an automobile mechanic turned fiddler, Clayton McMichen, was a big hit on WSB. McMichen had recorded for Ralph Peer in 1925, but without much success. Though McMichen was a superb fiddler who could play the traditional fiddle tunes with ease and style, he was more interested in modern, jazz-tinged music. In this he was at odds with rough, rustic Gid Tanner, but Walker put his idea across anyway; he would combine Puckett, Tanner, and McMichen into a new sort of super string band, an outfit that would bring together Tanner's comedy and authentic folk music, Puckett's singing skill, and McMichen's fiddling virtuosity. One of the old groups that regularly played at the fiddling conventions during World War I had been called the Lickskillet Orchestra, and this name suggested the name for the new group: the Skillet Lickers. It was to become the most famous name in string band history and it was to sell more records than any other similar group of the time.

In a sense, the Skillet Lickers was a pick-up group, originally formed just for recording purposes. Its success marked one of the relatively few instances where the modern mass media actually affected the performing style and repertory of older folk musicians; usually traditional performers were able to make the transition from pre to post media music with minimum changes in their music or style.

The Skillet Lickers made their first recordings in early 1926, mostly of old

traditional tunes like "Watermelon on the Vine," "Alabama Jubilee," and "Turkey in the Straw." Their biggest hit of that year, "Bully of the Town" backed with "Pass Around the Bottle and We'll All Take a Drink," ran up sales of over 200,000 copies. Soon the basic band (Tanner, McMichen, Puckett, and banjoist Fate Norris) was augmented with other musicians who dropped in and out of sessions with a confusing casualness. Frank Walker encouraged their use of as many as three fiddles on many sessions (an important innovation which anticipated by some years the multi-fiddle harmonies later popularized by western swing pioneer Bob Wills—even though Wills featured the harmonies on slower tunes, whereas the Skillet Lickers often had two fiddles playing fast breakdowns in near unison).

The Skillet Lickers' biggest record success arrived when Walker came up with the idea of mixing rustic comedy with the music. He wrote, with help from the boys, a skit called "A Corn Licker Still in Georgia," a playlet about a group of Georgia moonshiners who also happened to be musicians; between running off a batch of "sugar licker" (white lightning flavored with brown sugar) and getting in scrapes with the sheriff, the boys were always willing to "have a little tune." The original "Corn Licker Still" (1927) sold over 250,000 copies—an astounding figure for a regional audience—and inspired a series of sequels, which finally stopped during the Depression with "A Corn Licker Still in Georgia—Part 14."

The free-wheeling, hard-drinking

lifestyle of the northern Georgia musicians as portrayed on these skits was not too far from the private lives of the Skillet Lickers themselves; one of the band members had his fiddle hand shot off in a brawl in northern Georgia, and Atlanta bootleggers made regular stops at the Columbia studios down on Peachtree Street. A Skillet Lickers session was a party, and all kinds of bystanders got roped in; one old fiddler recalls recording on several Skillet Lickers sessions and “never getting anything but twenty-five dollars and drunk.” Other old-timers recall a bathtub of moonshine, replete with a well water dipper. The 1929 Columbia catalogue reflected this high humor of the band:

Here’s a team indeed! It’s a dance combination, and no high-stepping affair down their way draws the crowd like Gid and these pals of his, an all-star group.

The Skillet Lickers as a band made over eighty sides during the four years they stayed together, and individuals from the band made a good many more records under their own names; in fact, some of the members became regular studio musicians for Columbia’s Atlanta studio. Yet the men of the band still made most of their money from personal appearances, not from records. Gid Tanner recalled those days: “Got to playing, making big hit records, and then we got on the road and made some money. Got tuxedo suits, y’know . . . they’d shine like silver. Said, ‘We’ll have to play a while for these, got to get up some money. . . .’” The Skillet Lickers did



*Gid Tanner (left) and his son Gordon, leaders of The Skillet Lickers, shortly after they recorded their hit version of “Down Yonder.”* Courtesy Charles Wolfe.

indeed make money for Columbia: They were responsible for making fiddle-band music the dominant form of country music in the late 1920s and for making Atlanta the Nashville of the 1920s. One of the Skillet Lickers’ records, “Down Yonder,” was still in print as late as the 1950s.

It was no wonder that Frank Walker bent over backward to keep



Hear these new southern  
fiddle and guitar records

NOT so long ago Gid Tanner with his violin, and Riley Puckett with his guitar came from the mountains of Georgia to make records for Columbia. Gid has walked away with the first prize at some of the Old Time Fiddlers' Conventions in Atlanta. Riley and his guitar are known to thousands in the South who have heard him perform at county fairs.

Hear these Tanner and Puckett records. No Southerner can hear them and go away without them. And it will take a pretty hard-shelled Yankee to leave them. The fact is that these records have got that "something" that everybody wants. So listen to—

"Back All Our Babies To Sleep" Record 107 D  
"Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane"  
"Buckin' Mule"  
"Ham Cackle" Record 110 D

It will pay you to send in your orders at once for these two records. If ever there were a pair of double-barreled hits, these are.

COLUMBIA PHONOGRAPH CO., Inc.  
485 Broadway New York

Write to the Columbia branch in distribution nearest you.

**Columbia**  
New Process RECORDS  
Columbia has all the hits and usually first

A 1924 advertisement for a Tanner/Puckett record. Courtesy Archie Green.

the group together, but it was a hard job. The band was an unstable compound of brilliant, creative egos: Gid was too old-timey, McMichen was too pop-oriented, and Puckett was too experimental in his guitar runs. They bickered constantly and often toured separately, yet like the latter-day Beatles, they were less impressive as individuals than as a band. By coincidence, the Depression intervened and knocked the bottom out of the record business just as they were ready to dissolve anyway. Gid went back to chicken farming, while McMichen and Puckett tried to make it as professionals in the new musical world of the 1930s.

If one discounts citybilly singers like Vernon Dalhart, Riley Puckett

was the first genuine country singing star. Puckett (1894–1946) was blinded shortly after birth, and as a teen-ager in Georgia he was playing and singing for dance parties and on street corners. He began broadcasting over Atlanta's station WSB in 1922, and had soon established a national reputation. He made numerous records with just himself and his guitar, and many approached hit status; he and Vernon Dalhart dominated Columbia's early country music charts.

After he left the Skillet Lickers, he began to record for Victor, but, unlike Jimmie Rodgers, he was never really able to attract a national audience. He tried to expand his repertoire, adding more traditional items like "Ragged but Right" and "Chain Gang Blues," and even going to straight pop material like "When I Grow Too Old to Dream." But he never really broke out; perhaps he lacked proper management, perhaps he lacked the kind of original material Rodgers had. Whatever the problem was, he ended his career playing radio stations across the South, making fiddling contests, and traveling with his own tent show. His two hundred-plus recorded songs remain as examples of fine, early straightforward country (as opposed to folk) singing, and his guitar backup style (featuring single-note bass runs) is still admired by guitar pickers today.

Following on the success of the Skillet Lickers, dozens of string bands with bizarre, surrealistic names paraded through the recording studios. There were Bird's Kentucky Corn Crackers, Dr. Smith's Champion Hoss Hair Pullers, Wilmer Watts and the

Lonely Eagles, The West Virginia Snake Hunters, Fisher Hendley and his Aristocratic Pigs, Gunboat Billy and the Sparrow, Seven Foot Dilly and his Dill Pickles, Joe Foss and his Hungry Sand-Lappers, Mumford Bean and his Itawambians (from Itawamba County, Mississippi), and Ephriam Woodie and his Henpecked Husbands. Many of them were family groups, and many were semi-professionals who played mainly for local dances. They would do a handful of recordings and then disappear back into the countryside; today researchers and fans of this vibrant and exciting string-band music are not even sure what part of the country some of the early recording artists came from. When such groups recorded at a field session, there was no discussion of royalties; they were usually paid a flat rate of fifty dollars per record, and that was the end of it. If the record did well, the band might expect another session the next time the field crew was in the area, but that was all. The musicians would resume their full-time jobs as mill hands, railroad men, farmers, sign painters, or whatever, unaware of where their records might have gone or whom they might have influenced.

A few country string bands did, however, make it big on records. A group from Mississippi called The Leake County Revelers sold nearly two hundred thousand copies of their "Wednesday Night Waltz" and helped win elections for Huey Long. A rural Texas dance band called The East Texas Serenaders made a string of successful recordings for Columbia; they featured a fiddle, guitar, banjo—

and a cello, played in both bowed and plucked style,<sup>†</sup> and their music helped pave the way for western swing. In the eastern mountains, the Carolina Tar Heels were popular; they used a harmonica instead of a fiddle and featured the strong mountain singing of Clarence Tom Ashley (later rediscovered and made a mainstay of the folk revival of the 1960's) and the whistling antics of a man who billed himself as "the human bird." Charlie Poole, a very influential singer whose career was cut short, and Kelly Harrell both pioneered the techniques of singing to string-band accompaniment, and functioned as transitional figures between the string-band style and the emergence of vocal stars in the early 1930s.

The main catalyst in this transition, however, was to be Ralph Peer, and the major event was to be his trip to Bristol in the summer of 1927. That trip has been called the starting point for modern commercial music, but Peer was hardly aware of that during his first week in Bristol. In one sense, he was trying to prove himself. After pioneering the recording of old-time music and the use of field recording sessions to collect authentic material, Peer had seen his ideas grow into the "hillbilly" boom of the late 1920s, but in 1926 he quit his job with Okeh and for a time decided to get out of the record business; he had an idea that he could get rich mass-producing apple pies in bakeries. It was an idea whose time had not quite come, and

<sup>†</sup> There are numerous reports of early rural string bands using the cello, though relatively few of them recorded with such combinations.

so he eventually went to work for Victor. Victor was certainly one of the leading companies of the time, but they had, partly because of their prestigious "Red Seal" image, not really gone after the "hillbilly" market. After a while, though, they could no longer resist the sales potential of this market, and so they hired Peer to go out into the hills after talent for them. They gave him sixty thousand dollars, two engineers, and a portable recording setup, and told him to head South.

Peer, for his part, wanted certain conditions. While working for Okeh (General Phonograph Corporation) Peer had sensed that the day would come when copyrighting these old-time southern songs would prove valuable. He had seen (in 1925-26) a complex series of copyright lawsuits follow in the wake of the success of "The Wreck of the Old 97," and had earlier suggested that the Okeh Company take over copyrights to the songs of their exclusive artists. So when he was negotiating with Victor, he brought this matter up. As he recalled later in life, "I sat down and wrote a three-paragraph letter and said that I had considered the matter very carefully and that essentially this was a business of recording new copyrights and I would be willing to go to work for them for nothing with the understanding that there would be no objection if I controlled these copyrights."

Not thinking there was much of a future in "hillbilly" copyrights, Victor had no objections, and in July 1927, shortly before he left for his field trip, Peer organized the United Publishing Company. Later it became The

Southern Publishing Company, and Peer recalls he was looking at a three-month royalty check for a quarter of a million dollars.

Peer couldn't expect to make much money from actual sheet-music publication of the songs he recorded, but as publisher of the songs, he stood to make a good deal off record sales. (He later admitted that he made as much as 75 per cent of the royalties from record sales.) Thus it was to his advantage to find material in the field that was either original or traditional enough not to be in copyright, so that he could act as publisher for the songs. This had both good and bad effects. From a folklorist's point of view, it was good because it forced Peer to hunt out authentic folk performers of traditional material and to urge his musicians to emphasize original or traditional songs instead of pop material. (In this way, for instance, Peer recorded the first version of "Tom Dooley," in 1929, by blind Tennessee fiddler G. B. Grayson and singer Henry Whitter.) On the other hand, the method caused him to reject some fine musicians who didn't have original material. "That was the test," he recalled, and if artists didn't have original material, he threw them out. Later Peer became convinced that no country artist could really succeed unless he had original material, either written by himself or secured by his manager. He would also sign many of his field discoveries to personal management contracts if he thought they had potential.

He was testing these new methods of his for the first time in Bristol, and as he started his second week in the



*Maybelle, A. P., and Sara Carter. Courtesy Doug Green.*

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town he found dozens of people eager to sign up and record. One of these new groups was a vocal trio from nearby Maces Springs, Virginia, consisting of farmer-carpenter-fruit tree salesman A. P. Carter; his wife, Sara; and his sister-in-law Maybelle Carter. Sara and A. P. Carter had been singing together for informal mountain gatherings for over ten years, and for the last year they had been joined by Maybelle. Sara played the autoharp (a zitherlike instrument fitted with a series of chording dampers, well known in the rural South) and usually sang lead, while Maybelle played guitar and sang harmony. A.P. seldom played an instrument and confined his singing to, in his own words, "basin' in" every once in a while. A.P.'s father had been a mountain banjo player who had gotten religion and turned to

old ballads and religious songs for his music; A.P.'s mother sang a number of old ballads like "The Wife of Usher's Well," "Sailor Boy," and "Brown Girl," and A.P. learned to appreciate them. The fondness for old ballads and religious songs was to mark the Carter Family repertoire throughout their career.

After reading the newspaper story about Peer's recording session, A.P. got his crew together, loaded them in his old model A Ford, and headed for Bristol. Peer was somewhat disarmed by the group that appeared at his recording studio: There were A.P. and Sara, their three children, and Maybelle, who was expecting a child in a couple of months. Peer recalled: "They wander in—they're a little ahead of time and they come about twenty-five miles and they've come through



a lot of mud . . . and he's dressed in overalls and the women are country women from way back there—calico clothes on—the children are very poorly dressed.”

Mrs. Peer took two of the children outside to feed them ice cream and keep them quiet, while the Carters began singing “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow,” “Little Old Log Cabin by the Sea,” “Storms Are on the Ocean,” “Single Girl, Married Girl.” “As soon as I heard Sara's voice . . . that was it, you see,” recalled Peer. “I began to build around it. . . . I knew that was going to be wonderful. And they had plenty of repertoire. . . . A.P. had been apparently quite a traveler—he'd gone around quite a bit—collecting songs.” The Carters made six sides at this first session, with Sara singing lead on five of them.

When the first Carter Family record came out, A. P. Carter didn't even have a record player. He heard their first record on a floor-model Victrola at a store in Bristol; he didn't even know the record had been released. The local Victor dealer reported that he had sold two hundred copies of the disc in a few days and that Ralph Peer had reported that the release was doing well all over the South, having sold over two thousand copies within a month in Atlanta alone. The Carters soon got their first royalty check, which A.P. dutifully split up three ways; it was probably only .25 per cent of retail sales income, but it was enough to keep the family interested in making records.

Seven months later Peer called the group up in Camden, New Jersey, for their second session: twelve sides that

were to include the family's most enduring songs. Recorded here were “Keep on the Sunny Side,” an old 1906 pop song that became the group's theme song; “Anchored in Love,” an old gospel hymn that became a Carter Family standard; “Little Darling Pal of Mine,” later to become a folk-bluegrass warhorse; and “Wildwood Flower,” an old pop song that the Carter Family had learned orally.

With the latter record, it became obvious that the family had another valuable asset in Maybelle's guitar style; she liked to pick the melody on the bass strings and keep rhythm on the treble strings. Her rhythm style and use of melodic lines, which served to sketch the tune in a deceptively simple outline, influenced generations of southern guitar players, all the way from blues singer Leadbelly to folk-singer Woody Guthrie. “Wildwood Flower” became the test of accomplishment for all kinds of amateur guitar players, and remains so today. This style, along with the Carters' full, low-pitched mountain church harmonies and their easy, flowing tempo, made them unique among early country artists. They were the first successful country group vocal act; before them group singing had been pretty much a function of church or gospel music, and secular country music had been the province of solo singers or string bands. The Carters combined these two worlds in a beautiful and striking way.

But the Carters, in spite of their influence via records, could not become real professionals for a number of years. For instance, in 1929 A.P. had

to leave Virginia to go to Detroit to find work as a carpenter—and this was during the height of the group's Victor recording career. In fact, the need to keep regular nonmusic jobs often kept the members of the family apart during the Depression years. Peer was publishing their songs on a fifty-fifty basis, and they were receiving Victor royalties, but this was not enough to allow them to make ends meet.

Peer was acting as unofficial manager for the band but felt that their appeal wasn't broad enough to get them booked into the big theater and vaudeville circuits, where the big money was. So while his other big country act, Jimmie Rodgers, was touring these circuits to the tune of six hundred dollars a week, A. P. Carter was nailing Carter Family posters to trees in backwater mountain communities: "Admission 15 and 25 Cents. The Program is Morally Good." Most of the Carter Family "personals" were the result of their own advertising and A.P.'s informal promotion; letters would come from people asking about concerts, and A.P. would casually arrange these—no formal booking, no contracts, no agents. They appeared throughout the mid-South, and as far north as Maryland and Indiana. The personnel of the concert shows would depend on which members of the family happened to be in the area, and this in turn depended on their full-time jobs and private lives.

Carter Family biographer Ed Kahn has sketched what a typical stage show in these days was like. Often the Carters would arrive at the hall or schoolhouse early, mingle with the crowd until showtime, and often sell tickets

themselves. Shows would run from seven-thirty to nine or nine-thirty, and were usually opened by a little jingle that began, "How do you do, everybody?/How do you do?" A.P. would act as emcee for the show, introducing the members of the group, and perhaps telling a little about the songs—where they learned them, when they recorded them. The family never sold records from the stage, though they did sell little songbooks. Sara and Maybelle usually sat, while A.P. wandered around the stage; he was by nature very nervous, and this often gave his singing voice its distinctive quality. The group often took requests from the audience; if a request meant retuning the instruments, the audience waited; there was no comedy to cover it up. After the show, the Carters often stayed with a family in the neighborhood, and often they took these occasions to gather new material. A.P. was always interested in seeing old songbooks, handwritten ballads, or old sheet music. (Once the group was recording regularly, A.P. made regular song-hunting trips back into the hills, sometimes traveling with Leslie Riddles, a black guitar player, a friend of the family; while A.P. would copy the words of songs, Leslie acted as a sort of human tape recorder, remembering the melody line.)

The Carter Family continued to record until the eve of World War II, spreading some 270 sides over the labels of every major American record company. Their records were popular not only in America, but were released in Australia, Canada, England, India, Ireland, and South Africa as well, yet

the Carters never really enriched themselves as much as they enriched the record companies, the publishing companies, and the radio stations. By the late 1930s, however, they were at least able to play full time professionally, and were broadcasting nationally over Mexican border station XERA. Beset by personality differences (Sara and A.P. had separated in the early 1930s) and changing musical tastes, the family broke up for good in 1943.

Various members of the Carter Family continued to make a mark in later country music. Mother Maybelle continued to perform with her daughters up until the 1960s, and A. P. Carter performed with his children until his death in 1960. June Carter later became a fixture of Nashville's "Grand Ole Opry" and eventually married singer Johnny Cash.

The Carter music has become a hallowed canon in both country and folk music. It was the Carters who arranged and popularized "Wabash Cannonball" in 1929, not dreaming that the song would become an anthem for the King of Country Music, Roy Acuff. "Worried Man Blues" ("It takes a worried man/To sing a worried song") and "Engine 143," old folk songs codified by the Carters, enriched the city-bred coffeehouse folksingers of the 1960s. "I Am Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," "Foggy Mountain Top," "East Virginia Blues," and "Jimmie Brown the Newsboy," all performed by the Carters, became the bluegrass standards of Mack Wiseman, Flatt and Scruggs, and others. "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" and "Gospel Ship" became gospel standards, and the former

gained new symbolic significance as the title of a 1971 folk-rock album by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Not all the Carter songs were original compositions—many were recomposed or re-arranged versions of older songs that Peer quickly stamped with a copyright—but no other early country music group preserved so many genuine folk items and injected them into commercial channels.

Peer, of course, could foresee little of this that hot afternoon in Bristol. After the Carters left, he continued to audition other acts: a gospel group, a family string band, a husband-and-wife vocal team. But then, on August 4, another singer with commercial potential showed up. His name was Jimmie Rodgers, and he had phoned Peer the week before from Asheville to say that he thought he had the kind of music Peer wanted, and asked for an audition. Peer granted it.

Rodgers arrived in Bristol the night before the session with a string band in tow, the Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers. They planned to audition together, but Rodgers and the band got into an argument over how they would bill themselves, and Rodgers went over to audition for himself. It was a historic audition, but few realized it at the time.

For Rodgers, it was another chance in his continuing scramble to make it as a professional entertainer. The annals of early country music are full of men who turned to music because of handicaps that prevented them from doing a "normal day's work"—many were blind, and a few (like Deford Bailey, the first black star of the "Grand Ole Opry") were physi-

cally handicapped. In these early days, there was little attractive about the life of a professional musician, and many turned to it only as a last resort. Jimmie Rodgers was probably one of these, at least at first. He was often in poor health, and by the time he was in his midtwenties he had contracted tuberculosis. Before then he had spent half his life working on railroads as a callboy, baggagemaster, flagman, and brakeman. This was nothing out of the ordinary, since he was the son of a section hand and since the time and place of his birth—Meridan, Mississippi, in 1897—gave him few other opportunities for a living.

Rodgers often carried a little banjo with him in his railroading days, and when he got sick in 1924, it was natural that he should join a medicine show and sing songs in blackface to rural audiences in Tennessee and Kentucky. He went through a series of such jobs, trying to make enough to support his family; for a time he even played in a dance band with his sister Elsie McWilliams, later to become co-author of many of his famous songs. Eventually he landed in Asheville, North Carolina, right in the middle of the southern Appalachians, and decided to form his own band; he told his wife that he wanted to get “boys who’ll be willing to work whatever date I can get—schoolhouse, barn dance, roadhouse, beer joint, anything. . . . Folks everywhere are gettin’ tired of all this Black Bottom—Charleston—jazz music junk. ‘They tell me the radio stations keep gettin’ more and more calls for old-fashioned songs: ‘Yearning,’ ‘Forgotten,’ things like

that, and even the old plantation melodies. Well, I’m ready with ‘em.” The band landed one job on Asheville radio, and it lasted barely a month; they were back to playing the sticks when they read the account of Peer’s recording in Bristol.

When Peer first auditioned Rodgers, Peer had mixed feelings. He described them later for *Billboard*:

. . . I was elated when I heard him perform. It seemed to me that he had his own personal and peculiar style, and I thought that his yodel alone might spell success. Very definitely he was worth a trial. We ran into a snag almost immediately because, in order to earn a living in Asheville, he was singing mostly songs originated by

*The Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers, 1927. Jimmie is the one wearing glasses. Courtesy Bob Pinson.*



New York publishers—the current hits. Actually, he had only one song of his own—“Soldier’s Sweetheart”—written several years before. . . . In spite of his lack of repertoire, I considered Rodgers to be one of my best bets. Accordingly, I asked him to sign a managerial contract, explained to him the necessity to find new material, and talked to him about his future plans.

Rodgers’ first record was “The Soldier’s Sweetheart,” his recomposition of an older folk song, and a yodeling song, “Rock All Our Babies to Sleep.” Peer felt the choice was an accurate sample of Rodgers’ skills. Rodgers wanted to record a song he had done on the radio with a lot of success, “T for Texas, T for Tennessee,” but Peer felt he had enough for the time being. He paid Rodgers a token sum, and they parted.

Peer spent one more day recording in Bristol and then packed up his gear and headed for his next stop, Charlotte, North Carolina. In his two weeks in Bristol he had recorded over seventy tunes by twenty different groups; only a few of these groups would ever record again. Rodgers, for his part, moved his family to Washington, D.C., to play local clubs and theaters and await word from Peer.

Unlike those of the Carter Family, Rodgers’ first record was not an immediate hit; it brought in a modest royalty check of twenty-seven dollars—and no call from Peer. Rodgers finally took it upon himself to go up to New York to ask for another session; Peer let him record four more numbers, one of which was “Blue Yodel,” more commonly called “T for Texas.” This song was an instant

hit, and within a month after its release Peer was hustling Rodgers back into the studios to record legendary songs like “In the Jailhouse Now,” “Treasures Untold,” and “Brakeman Blues.” Within six months Rodgers’ royalties jumped to over two thousand dollars a month. Peer took over as his manager, encouraged him to come up with more and more original material, and used it to establish his own Southern Music Publishing Company as a viable firm.

It is still unclear exactly what made Rodgers so immensely popular so fast. It might have been his singing style, it might have been his repertoire, or it might have been something nobody today can really understand. Rodgers was by no means the first successful country singer (as opposed to instrumentalist or string band); both Vernon Dalhart and Riley Puckett had preceded him by several years. Rodgers’ stylistic innovations was to combine the imagery and stanza pattern of black country blues with the white tradition of yodeling. Rodgers’ high falsetto wordless passages may have had more roots in old-time mountain “hollerin’” than in formal yodeling, but whatever the case there had been nothing like them in country music—or in pop music, for that matter. Unlike the Carters, Rodgers had few genuine folk songs in his repertoire; however, many of his “Blue Yodels” (there were eventually to be thirteen of them) contained stanzas borrowed from earlier blues singers.

Some argue, in fact, that much of Rodgers’ success lay in his ability to popularize and “whiten” traditional Negro material, to make the ever-pop-

ular blues acceptable to a white audience. Carrie Rodgers, in her biography of her husband, describes how Rodgers as a boy would carry water to Negro section hands in Mississippi: "During the noon dinner-rests, they taught him to plunk melody from banjo and guitar. They taught him darkey songs; moaning chants and crooning lullabies. . . . Perhaps that is where he learned that peculiar caressing slurring of such simple words as 'snow'—'go.' . . ." Songs like "In the Jailhouse Now" (recorded by blues singer Blind Blake before Rodgers recorded his version) gave Rodgers a black element in his repertoire. He recorded with a number of black sidemen, including, on one auspicious occasion, jazz great Louis Armstrong. The gulf that separates modern white country music from black music was not all that great in the 1920s, when white and black singers often shared stanzas and tunes. Rodgers simply took advantage of this lack of segregation.

Rodgers was undoubtedly the first country singing star to attract a national, as opposed to a regional audience. He was also the first country singer to get rich off of his music, and the techniques Peer used to build his success became lessons for later country singers striving for professional status. Peer co-ordinated incomes from record sales, publishing royalties, and personal appearances, and made Rodgers enough money so that in 1929, not quite two years after the first Bristol session, the singer could build his fifty-thousand-dollar "Blue Yodeler's Paradise"—in his adopted hometown of Kerrville, Texas.

Peer did all this not by emphasizing Rodgers' country origins, as had Walker with the Skillet Lickers, but by minimizing them. Rodgers was always billed as "America's Blue Yodeler" and nothing more—nothing about old-time singing or hill-country roots. His publicity pictures showed him in a train brakeman's outfit, or in a white suit with broad-brimmed straw hat, or with a suit and a white Stetson hat, or even with a jaunty little beret and tie—but never in anything resembling hillbilly garb. Rodgers was able to get bookings on theater circuits and on tours that other country performers couldn't get, and his typical stage show was a Dutch mixture of different sorts of entertainment. In a 1929 stage show in Chattanooga, for instance, Rodgers used Clayton McMichen, the virtuoso fiddler who was trying to break out of his Skillet Lickers mold; Texas Tom, a blackface comedian; Billy Burke, of Fort Worth, "The Crooning Guitarist of WBAP"; Howard Campbell, a magician; and a backup band that included a clarinet player and a bass violinist. Such an assortment could indeed appeal to a southern audience—his Chattanooga concert filled the Municipal Auditorium and caused a mammoth traffic jam—but it could also appeal to a western or a midwestern audience.

Rodgers' wide appeal can also be measured by the fact that in 1929 he made a short ten-minute film called *The Singing Brakeman* and that the next year he did a screen test for a possible film with comedian Will Rogers. (Later, he also did a series of concerts with Will Rogers for the

benefit of victims of the Dust Bowl in 1931.)

In his recordings, Rodgers soon abandoned his simple guitar accompaniment for backup units of various studio musicians: jazz bands, dance bands, Hawaiian music, trumpets, clarinets, jug bands, and even, on one occasion, a musical saw. These may be seen as concessions to commercialism, as Rodgers selling out his country roots, but they helped him attract the kind of "crossover" audience he needed at the time. People who say that modern country music started with Jimmie Rodgers often stress his folk-music background; it would, however, be more accurate to stress his (or Peer's) ability to package and merchandise the music.

Many of Rodgers' finest songs were co-authored by his sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams in 1928 and 1929; these included many of his sentimental favorites like "My Old Pal," "Daddy and Home," "The Sailor's Plea," "I'm Lonely and Blue," and "Mississippi Moon." Many of them were in the sentimental tradition of the nineteenth century, but others departed drastically from this genteel tradition. Such were the famous blues-based songs, like "T for Texas," "Blue Yodel No. 4 (California Blues)," "Blue Yodel No. 8 (Muleskinner Blues)," and "Blue Yodel No. 9 (Standin' on the Corner)," and the "rough and rowdy" songs like "Pistol Packin' Papa," "Waiting for a Train," and "In the Jailhouse Now." The persona—the speaker—of the heart songs of the 1890s was a prim, gushy, sentimental gentleman; the persona of these Jimmie Rodgers songs was a

tough gritty, realistic, and self-mocking workingman. He was, in short, the recognizable persona of the typical modern country song. This is one of the reasons why his songs have endured in the country repertoire more than those of any of his contemporaries.

Jimmy Rodgers died on May 26, 1933, two days after his last recording session; he was thirty-five, and his career had spanned only six years. How commercially successful was that career? Rodgers became such a legend so soon that it's difficult to get an accurate, meaningful picture. Sales of his records have been wildly exaggerated; by no means did he have a string of million sellers. The most recent evidence suggests that Rodgers, during his career, had only one genuine million-seller, the coupling of "Blue Yodel No. 1" ("T for Texas") with "Away Out on the Mountain." Only four of his releases reportedly sold more than 250,000 copies during his career, and his total sales on the Victor label (78 rpm only) were probably between three and four million; his last release, in the depths of the Depression in 1933, sold barely a thousand copies. Of course, in the 1920s a record sale of 100,000 was a giant hit, and Rodgers' records continued to remain in print throughout the years; sales today might well total over twenty million copies.

His influence was far greater than his sales would indicate. Singers like Gene Autry, Bill Cox, Cliff Carlisle, Daddy John Love, Ernest Tubb, and Hank Snow began by imitating Rodgers; probably three fourths of the country singers starting in the 1930s

were in some way influenced by him. Rodgers himself became a culture hero, and a half dozen good songs (and a dozen bad ones) were written about his life and untimely death. The restless, rambling, hard-living, sentimental, family-loving Horatio Alger figure who dies before his time has become the archetype country singer hero; Rodgers' tragic fate has been re-enacted by later singers with almost ritualistic compulsion.

The tragedy of Jimmie Rodgers was not meaningless, for his music formed a new popular mass art form that became an integral part of the lives of millions of Americans suffering through the trauma of the Great Depression. He refined the music of these people, but more importantly, he devised ways to effectively communicate it in a world of mass media where the old channels of person-to-person folk transmission were being disrupted and the old values displaced. He made Ralph Peer and his publishing empire rich, to be sure, but he also made countless little people rich in another way. Roy Horton, later to be a key executive at Peer-Southern, was raised in the 1930s in a grim mining town in the Alleghenies, and he recalls an anecdote that illustrates this richness. "I recall that many times we went to the 'company store' to buy a loaf of bread, a pound of butter, and the latest Jimmie Rodgers record—he was that much a part of so many people's lives."

The development of the country recording industry was the first real step toward the commercialization of the music. Many old-time musicians first thought of going professional—

making money with their music, developing their music from a part-time hobby to a full-time vocation—when they had successful records. This pay, as we have seen, was meager enough—a \$50 lump sum, or, for the lucky ones, royalties amounting to \$.0015 per record on a release that retailed for \$.75—but the business worked, and the companies never went lacking for singers and pickers to record.

In the 1920s the business was dominated by seven major companies, three of them located in Chicago. By 1926 Sears was selling country records, leasing masters from other companies, and issuing them on their own label; Ward's soon got into this business, too, and a number of southern department store chains followed suit. Thus while a wide variety of labels seemed to exist, many of the actual masters were drawn from common company archives. Furthermore, as Rodgers' case shows, record sales in the 1920s were often not commensurate with the musical influence of the records. The average old-time release in the 1920s sold around 5,000–10,000 thousand copies, and during the Depression 1,000 copies was a good sale. Frank Walker's important Columbia 15000 series, so much prized today by historians and folklorists, averaged sales of 15,000–20,000 copies per release in the pre-Depression years. In many years, just four or five big hit records would account for a third or even a half of a company's total old-time music sales. The total number of old-time titles issued by the seven major companies prior to 1930 number about 3,700. Yet it is unsettling to note how comparatively few re-



cordings the major artists of this time made as compared to modern artists. Jimmie Rodgers' 110 recorded songs are the equivalent to only 9 modern albums—and a modern singer like George Jones, who is still in midflight, can claim at least 80 albums and over 700 songs to his credit. Early country records also had to get distributed without the most utilized tool of modern promotion, radio airplay. Ninety-five per cent of early southern radio was "live." Some record companies did start sponsoring shows to plug their latest records, but few of the companies felt that old-time music records were important enough to plug in this way.

There remains the matter of the authenticity of these early pioneer recordings: How accurately do they represent the voice of the people, and the music of the people? Some of the records were genuine folk music; some were mass-produced pop product. Only about 5 per cent of the pre-Depression old-time releases by major companies were old folk ballads in the strictest sense, but many older pop songs had gone into oral tradition and had been recorded by people who had little knowledge of the song's original publication and author. Many of the field recordings by men like Walker are probably fairly authentic reflections of rural folk culture, but there were many instances of the companies interfering with the musicians' repertoires, telling them to use some songs and forbidding them to use others (the Columbia field office in Atlanta had a well-stocked library of popular sheet music even during the heyday of the Skillet Lickers in the

late 1920s). The first generation of country-music recordings were not quite the simple, natural, folksy artifacts they are sometimes made out to be, but they were still a long way from the slick, rootless products of Tin Pan Alley.

If records were the music's prime medium in the 1920s, radio was to be the prime medium of the 1930s. Throughout the first decade of the music's development, radio was developing along with it. It is harder to understand the exact impact radio made on the country music fan of the 1920s, however, because none of the actual radio shows were preserved. They were all done live, of course, and there was no way to preserve them. We can go back today and actually listen to the first big country hits of Fiddlin' John Carson, but there is no way we can ever hear the actual sound of the early "Grand Ole Opry" or the "National Barn Dance." We can only rely on the memories of those who were there and measure the effect the shows had.

That effect was considerable. Unlike the record industry, which flourished for over twenty years before it discovered old-time music, the radio industry was interested in the music almost from the start. It is generally acknowledged that commercial radio began officially in 1920 when station KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcast the Harding-Cox election results to an audience of some 2,000. Sixteen months later, in March 1922, old-time music was on the air, courtesy of Atlanta station WSB, the South's first commercial broadcasting station. WSB had begun as a public-service station owned and operated (as were many



George D. Hay, “discoverer” of the “Grand Ole Opry.” Courtesy Charles Wolfe.

early stations) by the local newspaper; finally the paper hired a station director, Lambdin Kay. Kay brought all kinds of rural talent into his broadcasting studios, including Fiddlin’ John Carson, the Jenkins Family, and a group of Sacred Harp singers. He later explained his rationale by arguing that “hillbilly or country music talent appeared on the station, since this was a folk music of the region and was both popular and was available at little or no cost.”

Most of the early artists were paid absolutely nothing for broadcasting, though they were allowed to announce where they were appearing, what fiddling contest they were a part of, or

whatever. This sort of tradeoff continued on many rural stations well into the time of World War II. Early radio hardly encouraged country musicians to think they could make a living with their music, and it’s noteworthy that the two biggest names of the time—the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers—seldom appeared on radio in the 1920s.

Radio grew with breathtaking speed. By the end of 1922, there were some 510 active stations broadcasting, and 89 of these were in the South. Some were tiny local stations with a radius of a few miles and a power of 10–20 watts; others were powerhouses like the 500-watt WSB, which easily

commanded a nationwide audience. The formats of many of the smaller stations were extremely flexible, and anyone who wandered in with an instrument could probably get on the air.

Small-town newspapers seldom printed detailed broadcasting schedules, so today there is no way to determine the exact extent of local country programming, but researchers have determined that one of the first country "barn dance"-type programs originated over WBAP, Fort Worth, in January 1923. The "barn dance" format was to become one of the most common in country music broadcasting. It was usually an anthology program that featured a sort of repertory company of different types of musicians; it was informal and unstructured, and the company of musicians was presented as one big happy family. Audience feedback was important, and requests were often answered on the air. All sorts of old-time music was presented, from barbershop quartets to Hawaiian bands to comedians to singers of sentimental songs, but the key image of the barn-dance show was the fiddle band, and the fiddle-band music was often accompanied with square-dance calls so that those listening at home could dance along. (Nobody knows if anyone ever really danced to the music of these shows.) It was a warm, folksy show format, and it served to personalize the new-fangled piece of technology, the radio, and to offer rural Americans an oasis of normalcy in a desert of strange accents and stodgy announcers.

The widespread popularity of Fort Worth's informal and irregular old-time show—it was heard as far away

as New York, Canada, and Hawaii—attracted the attention of other program directors, who began to realize that there was a vast rural audience that was being ignored by the constant programming of semiclassical music, dance bands, and noodling piano players. During the early 1920s most Americans were living in towns of 8,000 or less population.

The two major barn-dance programs were soon born: the "National Barn Dance" of WLS, Chicago, and the "Grand Ole Opry" of Nashville. The "National Barn Dance" began in 1924 and was broadcast regularly until 1960; the "Opry" began in late 1925 and is still heard every week in the 1970s. The shows had a good deal in common: Both were started by companies that wanted to sell products to rural America, and both saw the means to sell this product turn into a product—the music—in its own right. The "Opry" tended to be a shade more authentic, a little bit funkier, perhaps because it drew from the vast pool of native southern talent in and around Nashville. There were few mountains around Chicago, though there were many Southerners attracted North by factory work, and a supply of vaudeville performers skilled at appealing to rural tastes.

WLS (the initials stood for "World's Largest Store," in deference to the station's owners, Sears, Roebuck & Co.) began the "National Barn Dance" on April 19, 1924, just a week after the station went on the air. They announced it as a program "planned to remind you folks of the good fun and fellowship of the barn warmings, the husking bees, and the



*Studio A of WSM, first home of the "Opry." Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*

square dances in our farm communities of yesteryear and even today."

The fiddle band of Tommy Dandurand (banjo, fiddle, guitar—and drums!) helped spark early shows. George C. Biggar, the director of the show, recalled other early successful acts: "When Chubby Parker picked his little old banjo and sang 'I'm a Stern Old Bachelor,' he struck responsive chords in countless hearts. Identified with earlier days of the "Barn Dance" also were Walter Peterson and his 'Double-barreled Shotgun' [Peterson played guitar, sang, and played harmonica on a neck rack]; Cecil and Esther Ward and the Hawaiian guitars; the good old Maple City Four;

and Bradley Kincaid, the 'Kentucky Mountain Boy.' Bradley was the first perhaps to popularize dozens of the unpublished mountain ballads."

Nearly all the early "Barn Dance" stars established their reputations solely by radio; few recorded very much, and what they did record was on Sears' own label and was sold because of their radio popularity (many of these record labels identified the performer as a WLS star). Bradley Kincaid, a rather self-conscious singer and collector of folk songs, reached a vast audience through his radio broadcasts and through his sale of song books over the air; his case proves that the history of country music is by no

means the history of country music records.

The leading announcer for the "National Barn Dance" during its first year was former Memphis newspaper writer George D. Hay, who billed himself as "The Solemn Old Judge" and started each show off with an imitation train whistle. Hay was an Indiana native who had gotten into radio when the newspaper he worked on in Memphis started station WMC and Hay found himself appointed radio editor, which meant that he was also announcer on the station. WLS hired him away from WMC in 1924, and later that year he won the *Radio Digest* award as the country's most popular announcer. Hay was not at this time associated especially with the "Barn Dance": He was the leading announcer for all types of shows on WLS, so when the National Life and Accident Insurance Company of Nashville decided, in 1925, to build the fanciest radio station in the South, they went after the best talent. They asked Hay to come back to the South and become station director for WSM, "The Air Castle of the South."

Hay arrived in Nashville in November 1925 and began to cast about for ways to improve the rather anemic fare then being offered to the good citizens of Nashville: story ladies, brass bands, women's-club culture. He noted that some old-time musicians, including a lively string band led by a rural physician named Dr. Humphrey Bate, had already appeared informally on Nashville radio and had drawn a surprising audience response. He decided to experiment further, and on November 28, 1925, he in-

vited a seventy-seven-year-old fiddler, the uncle of a staff musician, to play the fiddle on the air. The fiddler, a Tennessee native named Uncle Jimmy Thompson, had a repertoire that stretched back to the Civil War, and he was anxious, in his own words, "to throw my music out across the American."

Later, Hay himself described Thompson's first appearance:

Uncle Jimmy told us he had a thousand tunes. . . he was given a comfortable chair in front of an old carbon microphone. While his niece, Mrs. Eva Thompson Jones, played the piano accompaniment, your reporter presented Uncle Jimmy and announced that he would be glad to answer requests for old time tunes. Immediately telegrams started to pour into WSM.

One hour later at nine o'clock we asked Uncle Jimmy if he hadn't done enough fiddling to which he replied, 'Why shucks a man don't get warmed up in an hour. I just won an eight-day fiddling contest down in Dallas, Texas, and here's my blue ribbon to prove it.'

Other WSM executives were astounded at the response to Uncle Jimmy, but Hay was not really surprised; he had seen the same thing in Chicago when the "National Barn Dance" had begun to broadcast old-time music. Hay began to make plans; he told a friend that he planned to start a new show, "something like the 'National Barn Dance' in Chicago and expected to do better because the people were real and genuine and the people really were playing what they were raised on." Thus on December 27, 1925, about a month after Uncle

Jimmy first appeared on the air, the Nashville *Tennessean* announced: "Because of this recent revival in the popularity of old familiar tunes, WSM has arranged to have an hour or two every Saturday night. . . ." Thus a regularly scheduled barn dance show was born, and within a few months Hay had assembled about twenty-five regular acts for the show.

The people of Nashville were not too happy at the idea of having a hill-

billy show originating from their city, which they liked to call "the Athens of the South." Some protested, but National Life was reaching a vast rural audience beyond the city of Nashville itself, and it was an audience to which they wanted to sell insurance. The show grew; soon it was running to over three hours on Saturday nights. WSM increased its power until it had the strongest clear-channel signal in the South, and soon, letters

The "Opry" cast, 1930. Courtesy WSM.



about the Saturday night "Barn Dance" were coming in from all over.

The NBC radio network was formed in 1927, and WSM signed on as an affiliate. Most nights the station carried slick, well-produced network shows originating out of New York, but on Saturday night, WSM refused the network fare and stuck to the "Opry"—except for one fifteen-minute segment when the "Opry" was interrupted by "Amos 'n' Andy." By this time other Nashville stations were trying to copy the WSM success by starting their own "Barn Dances," using the same local musicians who had made the "Barn Dance" a hit. Partly because of this, WSM started paying its performers. Usually it was only a token payment of something like one dollar a minute, and most performers seldom performed more than fifteen minutes.

Hay knew his audience, and he would often admonish his musicians, "Keep it down to earth, boys." He rejected innovations and new tunes. He wrote press releases that emphasized the rustic backgrounds of his performers; in 1929 he was arguing that "every one of the 'talent' is from the back country" and that the music represented "the unique entertainment that only Tennessee mountaineers can afford." He posed his musicians in overalls, in corn fields with coon dogs, even in pigpens; he gave the bands colorful names like the Gully Jumpers, the Possum Hunters, and the Fruit Jar Drinkers. This upset some of the musicians; many of them were not rustic at all, but were Nashville citizens working at occupations like garage mechanics, watch repair-

men, and cigar makers. For instance, Dr. Humphrey Bate, whose band Hay dubbed the Possum Hunters, was a well-educated physician who enjoyed classical music and wintered in Florida. Yet Hay, sensing the popularity of the hillbilly image that was enriching groups like the Skillet Lickers, continued to impose this image on his new show. The final touch came in December 1927 when Hay, in an off-the-cuff remark, dubbed the show "Grand Ole Opry." The name was a deliberate parody of "Grand Opera," the term used to describe a series of programs that had been coming to WSM over NBC. It stuck, and Hay used it to enhance the hayseed image of the show.

In spite of the fabricated nature of the hayseed image, the show was not lacking in colorful characters and authentic folk music. Uncle Jimmy Thompson, for instance, was wont to complain vociferously when his niece had his trousers pressed prior to his performance. "Hey thar," he would say, "who ironed them damned wrinkles in these britches? I like my britches smooth and round. Fit my kneecaps." Obed Pickard, the first vocal star of the show (much of the pre-1930 music was string-band fare), played for Henry Ford himself and parlayed his "Opry" success into a national network radio show of his own and the Pickard Family.

Dr. Humphrey Bate, whom Judge Hay called "the Dean of the Opry," was probably the first country musician to broadcast over Nashville radio. He was basically a harmonica player and he led a large band that often included as many as six or seven pieces;



*Dr. Humphrey Bate and his Possum Hunters: the first string band on the "Opry." Left to right: Oscar Stone (the fiddler who took over the band when Bate died in 1936), Walter Liggett, Staley Walton, Paris Pond, and Oscar Albright playing the bowed string bass—a rare use of the bowed doghouse bass in country string-band music. Note the business suits; a few years later George Hay, in an attempt to rusticate the "Opry" image, would pose the same band in a cornfield. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*

all the band members lived in a little hamlet northeast of Nashville and played together for years. In fact, Dr. Bate had led string bands in the area since the turn of the century, playing on riverboat excursions, picnics, and even for silent movies. Dr. Bate's band was the mainstay of the early "Opry" shows, and he appeared more than any other string band; for years, his band opened the "Opry" with "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old-Town Tonight." Dr. Bate learned a

lot of his instrumental tunes from an old ex-slave he knew as a boy; Bate's repertoire was full of rare and unique folk melodies, as well as ragtime, pop music, and even Sousa marches. When Dr. Bate died in 1936 his band was taken over by his fiddler Oscar Stone and it continued to be a part of the "Opry" cast up until the 1950s. Dr. Bate's daughter, Alcyone Bate Beasley, started playing with the band at the tender age of thirteen and had a successful career in pop music at



WSM; she still appears on the "Opry" today. The band with which Alcyone plays, the Crook Brothers, is another early band from the first year of the Opry. Leader Herman Crook learned a lot from Dr. Bate, and carries on his tradition of the harmonica-led string band.

Deford Bailey was the Opry's sole black performer, a tiny, fiercely proud harmonica player and blues singer. Deford joined the Opry during its first year, and, though condescendingly labeled as the show's "mascot," he was immensely popular; in 1928, for in-

stance, he appeared on the show twice as often as anyone else. Deford always worked alone, and specialized in harmonica virtuoso pieces like "Pan American Blues," "Fox Chase," and "John Henry"; in the days before amplification systems he used a large megaphone attached to his harmonica to make himself heard. Deford was almost certainly the only black man of his generation—or of several generations to come—to have a regular role in a major country radio show. Exactly what his presence on the early "Opry" implied for black-white music inter-change is still being debated by historians.

Deford apparently never really saw himself as a blues musician in a hillbilly setting. He grew up in rural Tennessee, not far from Nashville, in the early 1900s, and most of the music to which he was exposed during his formative years was what Deford himself called "black hillbilly music." As a boy Deford knew many black men who played old-time music; his father played the fiddle, and his uncle was the best black banjo player he knew. Deford's own picking had a delightful ragtime touch to it, and there were relatively few links between his music and that of other country blues artists of the time. He might well have been one of the last exemplars of the tradition of "black hillbilly music." It is a tradition hardly documented in the field recordings of the 1920s, since the commercial companies pigeonholed blues into special "race" series and country into the special "hillbilly" series. Black hillbilly music didn't really fit into either, and when the field scouts ran into it, they usually

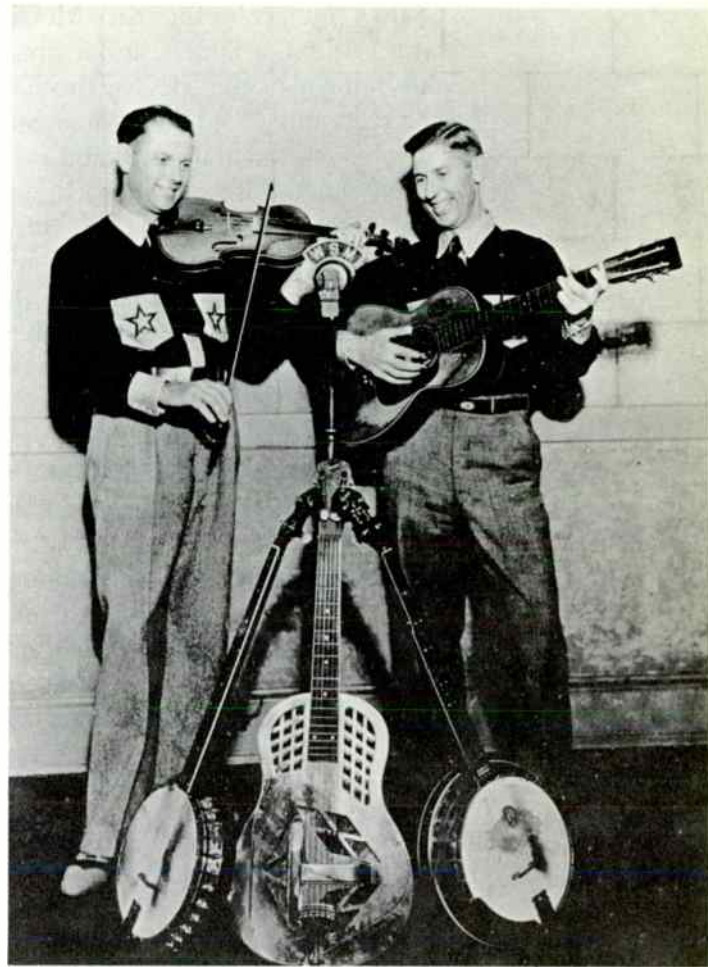
*Deford Bailey. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*



ignored it. It is interesting that Deford's own records were released in the "hillbilly" series by one company, and in the "race" series by another one.

Deford continued to play regularly on the "Opry" throughout the 1930s, traveling and touring with people like Uncle Dave Macon, Roy Acuff, and Bill Monroe. He left the "Opry" in 1941 amid a good deal of bitterness but still widely respected by thousands of white listeners as "the harmonica wizard," he opened a shoeshine stand in downtown Nashville.

The McGee Brothers, from Franklin, Tennessee, both served apprenticeships with Uncle Dave Macon (see below) and then went on to become mainstays of "Opry" string band music. The elder brother, Sam McGee, was one of the major purveyors of old-time mountain solo guitar style. Sam was one of the first country musicians to start playing the guitar in middle Tennessee; he soon developed a unique "flat top" style wherein he played the rhythm and melody simultaneously. By 1926 he was recording solo numbers like his famous "Buck Dancer's Choice," one of the most difficult of old-time guitar standards. Sam utilized a lot of blues and ragtime in his guitar stylings and came up with a creative mixture of folk and pop influences. Though he was not as well known as the other major old-time guitar stylist, Maybelle Carter, and though he spent much of his early career as a sideman, Sam's early records like "Franklin Blues," "Knoxville Blues," and "Railroad Blues" show that he was the first country musician to really exploit the guitar as a solo instrument. Up until his death in



*Sam and Kirk McGee. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*

1975, at age eighty-one, he continued to play regularly on the "Opry." Discovered by the young northern musicians in the folk revival of the 1960s and given his due as the pioneer instrumentalist he was, Sam died with at least some idea of the influence his own music had had on the world. He was luckier than many old-time pioneers who died quietly in obscurity, never having any idea of the influence their old records had had on people.

Sam's younger brother Kirk McGee was a banjoist, a fiddler, and a singer who brought to the McGee Brothers act a repertoire of old fiddle tunes and a love of sentimental songs and even church songs. Kirk played with Sam most of the time and was the entrepreneur of the team—"I went out and got the business," he said later. In the 1930s the McGees teamed with a Dickson, Tennessee, fiddler named Arthur Smith to form one of the most influential string bands of the 1930s, the Dixieliners. Touring out of the WSM "Opry" bureau, the band traveled during the week and broadcast on Saturday nights; it was a no-nonsense, old-time string band that emphasized technical ability over showmanship, but the audiences ate it up. Kirk recalls, "Arthur was a very solemn fellow. But his fiddling impressed them. He just whipped it out and played and they sat up and listened." Smith popularized a long string of original fiddle numbers, many of which have gone into folk tradition and have become bluegrass standards. They include "Pig in the Pen," "Dickson County Blues," "More Pretty Girls Than One," and "Beautiful Brown Eyes." The Dixieliners never recorded in their prime, and they are another instance of how radio performers could and did influence the music without the benefit of hit recordings.

The mainstay of the "Grand Ole Opry" in its first decade was a man who has come to symbolize the spirit of old-time music, Uncle Dave Macon (1870-1952). Along with the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, Macon was a prime influence in the music

of the 1920s, and a major link between the folk and commercial traditions. However, unlike the Carters and Rodgers, who worked primarily on phonograph records, Macon was very active in both records and radio. A. P. Carter was thirty-six when he made his first record and launched his career, and Jimmie Rodgers was thirty, but Uncle Dave was fifty-four, and his musical heritage went a good deal farther back into the nineteenth century. In fact, Uncle Dave had a career that began with singing and playing the banjo on the vaudeville stage and at rural, lantern-lit schoolhouses, and extended all the way up to his appearance on television in the early 1950s. During this time he became one of the most beloved entertainers in the music's history; he is still enjoyed today, via his records, by millions who never saw him perform. People who know nothing else about the early generations of country music recognize his name. Folklorists have called Uncle Dave a cultural catalyst and a preserver of countless traditional songs; radio historians have called him "the first featured star of the 'Grand Ole Opry'"; the popular press of the time referred to him as "the king of the hillbillies" or "the Dixie Dew-drop." Uncle Dave was more modest; he described himself merely as "banjoist and songster, liking religion and meetings, farming, and thanking God for all his bountiful gifts in this beautiful world he has bestowed upon us."

Uncle Dave (born David Harrison Macon) came from the Cumberland plateau in middle Tennessee, near McMinnville. As a teen-ager he lived in Nashville, where his father, a for-



Courtesy Doug Green.

mer Confederate Army officer, operated an old hotel. This hotel catered to the many vaudeville and circus performers who came through Nashville in those days, and the young Macon learned to love their songs and music. By the time he was fifteen, he had his first banjo; in his own words, it was Joel Davidson, “a noted comedian and banjoist . . . that inspired Uncle Dave to make his wishes known to his dear aged mother and she gave him the money to purchase his first banjo.” Soon he was learning many of the popular vaudeville songs of the day, and he began to play informally for friends and relatives. When he married, he moved back to the country and there continued to sing and learn old folk songs from people in the community. But he continued to play and sing only for his friends. He formed a

freight hauling company, the Macon Midway Mule and Transportation Company, and hauled freight with mule teams; many old-timers in the area today can recall him singing as he drove along, or stopping to rest under a shade tree and taking out his banjo.

In 1920 Uncle Dave became a victim of technological unemployment: A truck line started in competition with Macon Midway, and he chose not to compete. At the age of fifty, he began thinking seriously about a new career—one in music. His first public performance (about 1921) was a charity event in Morrison, Tennessee; as he recalled later: “The Methodist church there needed a new door. I gave a show, then passed the hat and collected the money, seventeen dollars.” Soon a talent scout from the Loew’s vaudeville theaters heard him and offered him a contract, and suddenly Uncle Dave found himself a stage star, playing his banjo and telling his jokes at Loew’s theaters around the country. He was so popular that other theater chains tried to buy his contract. In 1923 he hired a young partner, a skinny Nashville fiddler and singer named Sid Harkreader. A little later he added a “buck dancer” to his cast. By 1924 Uncle Dave’s name was famous across the South.

In the summer of 1924, a local furniture company sent Uncle Dave and Sid Harkreader to New York to make their first and most famous records: “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy,” “Hill Billie Blues,” and his imitation of an old-time hunt, “Fox Chase.” Uncle Dave also got his first look at the big city of New York, and took it in style. Once, after he had visited a

barber shop and ordered “the works,” he was presented a bill for \$7.50 and was barely able to conceal a gasp. Finally recovering his poise, he muttered, “I thought it would be \$10.” Afterward he wrote in his expense book: “Robbed in barber shop . . . \$7.50.”

Uncle Dave’s records were so successful that he was called back into the studios repeatedly in the 1920s; for a time he made regular trips to New York twice a year. The songs he recorded came from many sources. He learned some from oral tradition, many from the old vaudeville circuits, and a number from old sheet music via an aunt who played parlor piano. He owed—and acknowledged—a debt to black musicians; he was exposed to black music as a child on the farm and later as he listened to roustabouts working on the Cumberland River. Many of his songs were moralistic, such as “You Can’t Do Wrong and Get By,” an old gospel hymn; others had a rowdy, good-time flavor, such as “Bully of the Town” and “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy.” Some, like “Them Two Gals of Mine,” can hardly be played on the radio even today. Apparently he saw no hypocrisy in singing a church song one minute and a gamey song the next. Once he took a string band into a recording studio and recorded one day as “The Fruit Jar Drinkers” and the next day as “The Dixie Sacred Singers.” This sort of schizophrenia took its toll: Uncle Dave would often suffer from acute or chronic depression, and more than once was hospitalized for it.

Uncle Dave was also a skilled banjo player, and his style continues to in-

fluence pickers like Pete Seeger today. His “rapping” style was a three-finger style probably derived from the minstrel techniques of the nineteenth century; his combination of thumb, index, and middle fingers yielded a bewildering variety of rolls and runs. He was also a trick banjoist; one of his early posters announced, “Uncle Dave Macon is the only man in captivity who plays and sings on two banjos at the same time.” He would twirl the banjo, toss it in the air, and dance around it, never missing a beat. His *tour de force* was called “Uncle Dave Handles a Banjo the Way a Monkey Handles a Peanut.”

Uncle Dave also pioneered country comedy. On many of his records he would introduce his songs with a story or a joke, or even a bit of doggerel poetry. On “Tennessee Jubilee” he starts by saying:

Well, well folks, I’m a-feeling fine, just ate a hearty dinner and now I’m going to play you something that’s round here, an old Tennessee Jubilee. But before I sing you the piece, I have a cousin lives down in Rutherford County, Tennessee. She’s a woman, and her brother was a-telling me about her swappin’ a dry cow for an old Ford car last summer. And she learned to run it pretty well in the wheat fields after they got done thrashing. And she decided to go into the city on Saturday. But she went out to the highway, and the traffic was so thick that she backed out, and started to go in at night. First thing she done, she drove over the signal line and the traffic officer stopped her and there she was; she stuck her head out the window and says, “What’s the matter?” The traffic gentleman says, “Why, you haven’t

got your dimmers on." She says, "Lord, Lord, I reckon I have—I put on everything Mam laid out for me to wear before I left home." And she says, "Who is you anyhow?" He says, "I'm the traffic-jam man, ma'am." "Well, I'm mighty glad to you told me. Mam told me to fetch her a quart—have it ready for me when I go out, will you, please?"

Uncle Dave wanted to make each record sound more personal, to get across with each song some of his own high spirits and good humor. He wanted each record to be a miniature performance, just like he was used to giving onstage. Whereas the barn-dance format functioned to personalize the machine of the radio, Uncle Dave's format tended to personalize the machine of the phonograph.

Though Uncle Dave recorded more than most other musicians of his day, he continued to tour on personal appearances for most of his income. His sometime partner Sam McGee recalled traveling hundreds of miles in an old touring car with side curtains on the windows. When Uncle Dave was not booked on the vaudeville circuit, he booked his own shows through voluminous personal correspondence. He was his own agent, booker, and advertising agency. He felt, however, that the best advertising was word of mouth. When he drove into a town where he wanted to do a show, he usually headed for the school. There he would offer to do a free show for the children. After the show, he would be sure to mention where he would perform that night (it was often the same schoolhouse)—and let the kids carry the word home to their parents.

The grapevine would do the rest, and the evening show would be well attended—at twenty-five cents a head.

When Hay's "Barn Dance" started in 1925, Uncle Dave was one of the first performers; in fact, for some time he was about the only real professional on the show. He was not on every show—he could still make more money from touring than from Hay's one dollar a minute—but when he did appear, his audience was waiting for him. One local Tennessee resident recalls that his family had one of the first radios in the community, and when they learned that Uncle Dave would be on the "Barn Dance," they kept the news quiet; they were afraid the neighbors would find out and "swarm into the house to hear Uncle Dave and trample us." Since Uncle Dave was the Opry's first really big star, it was natural that in 1931 he headlined the first touring company sent out by the "Opry": Uncle Dave Macon and his Moonshiners.

By the early 1930s Uncle Dave was a regular fixture on the "Opry," and in 1939 he went to Hollywood to star with Roy Acuff in the film version of "Grand Ole Opry." He also toured with such legendary figures as the Delmore Brothers, Roy Acuff, and Bill Monroe. Until just a few months before his death, Uncle Dave was playing regularly on the "Opry"; by then he had become one of the "Opry's" most cherished links with its folk heritage, for his colorful personality and stubborn individuality made him a legend. Even today, veteran musicians still sit around the "Opry" dressing rooms—and endlessly swap "Uncle Dave" stories; one can argue that

Uncle Dave has become one of the music's few occupational heroes.

Some people like to call the 1920s the "golden age" of country music, but for the musicians, it was far from that. Few enjoyed the success of a Rodgers or a Dalhart. Most struggled constantly to improve their lots and to try to make a decent living—or part of one—with their music.

The period was a bewildering transition era that saw the music attempting to define itself and to adapt itself to the new forces of mass media, yet it is not quite accurate to speak of the age in terms of crass commercialism finally winning out over a noble folk tradition. Since the late nineteenth century, commercialism had been an ever-present part of the folk tradition;

the term "old-time music" embraced all forms of older music, folk and pop alike. The impulse to professionalize was present throughout the 1920s, from the earliest recordings of Fiddlin' John Carson and Henry Whitter. However, it was only toward the end of the era, when Peer and others had established country music as a distinct genre of pop music, that this impulse bore real fruit.

For his part, Peer only realized the effect he was having on the music after the fact. He later recalled that he had intended to use the profits of his hillbilly business to establish himself as a publisher of mainstream popular songs—but before long, he was realizing that his means were overshadowing his end.

## *Depression and Boom*

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The popular image of country music in the 1930s—the Depression years—is romantic. It features southern families filing into grocery stores, ordering up what meager supplies they could afford “and the latest Jimmie Rodgers record”; it is a Norman Rockwell portrait of a frail and feeble, threadbare but proud, slowly growing musical outcast isolated on Walton’s Mountain. The facts of the matter are another story.

Country music in the 1930s was far from just a regional southeastern phenomenon; it was a genuine daily event all across rural America. More than that, though, it was also an era of experimentation and creativity that has yet to be matched in country music’s history. It seemed that the whole country was bursting with excitement over the music. Radio had discovered a dedicated market, the American farmer, who warmly accepted country

music into his home and listened to it with clockwork regularity, and no one group was more excited than the talented singers and musicians who suddenly found that by playing music (whether creating it or re-creating it) they could make a living. Young musicians from literally every part of the country began forging unique and individual sounds and styles, combining the music from whatever their ethnic background might be with the diverse new sounds brought to them by record, by radio, and, as time went by, by personal appearances. The era was tremendously creative and exciting musically. The panorama of musical styles developed was extremely diverse, and the entire decade, despite the hardships wrought by the Depression at one end and the threat of world war at the other, was for country music one of stretching and flexing young muscles, striving to grow



and develop in innumerable ways all at once.

At the beginning of the decade, country music was made up of four basic styles: the fiddle bands, the solo singers, followers of the Carter Family, and followers of Jimmie Rodgers. Despite the grinding effects of the Depression, there were imitators and practitioners of all these styles trying to earn a living in music, most of them through the medium of radio.

Although radio had been around since the early 1920s, its popularity skyrocketed during the Depression for the simple reason that while a phonograph and a radio might have roughly the same initial price (which was rather high for the era), the continuing cost of buying new records (at \$.75 each) made the phonograph a luxury fewer and fewer could afford. Roland Gellatt, in his *The Fabulous Phonograph*, first pointed out the astonishing statistic that record sales reached a peak of 104 million in 1927, but by 1932 the total sales for the year were but six million, an astonishing 5.8 per cent of the entire total of only five years earlier.

Records continued to sell, of course, but into this astounding sales gap stepped radio, with its one-time purchase price and free programming. Its boosters were quick to respond to rural America's desire for country music, filling the early morning and noon-time hours with live local broadcasts, alternating homespun country music with ads for farm products or tools. It was a forum in which most of the country stars of the next decade got their start.

The Saturday nights were some-

thing else again. The music that caught the interest of the farmer in the early morning and noontime hours seemed a natural for a full-fledged barn dance on Saturday night, a nostalgic harkening back to the real dances in barns and the apple peelings and corn shuckings that were a staple—romanticized with the passage of time—of life before World War I, “The War to End All Wars.” No other single factor explodes the myth of country music-as-southeastern-phenomenon-in-the-1930s as much as the quick and widespread proliferation of these Saturday night radio barn dances on a nationwide basis throughout the decade.

One of the earliest was the “National Barn Dance,” heard over WLS in Chicago. Contrary to the commonly held assumption that the “Opry” reigned supreme from its inception, the “National Barn Dance” was in fact far more popular in this era, serving an immense amount of midwestern, Great Plains, and southern territory with its homespun acts, many of whom—like big-voiced sentimental singer Henry Burr and organist Grace Wilson—were not really “country,” but had a definite romantic and nostalgic appeal to a segment of rural listeners.

Among those we would call real country entertainers, longtime staples of the show were the immensely popular Lulu Belle and Scotty, the Hoosier Hot Shots, Arkie the Woodchopper, Mac and Bob, the Cumberland Ridge Runners, and Karl and Harty. A list of cast members who came and went on to other things is even more impressive: Gene Autry, Rex Allen, Ed-



*Roy Acuff and the Smokey Mountain Boys. Courtesy Country Music Foundation.*

die Dean, Patsy Montana, George Gobel, Louise Massey and the West-erners, Homer and Jethro, and Red Foley.

The importance of the WLS “National Barn Dance” is nearly impos-ible to underestimate, and is even more dramatic when some statistics are brought to bear on the subject: In 1930, 40.3 per cent of American homes had a radio, and more than three quarters of those were in the north-eastern and north-central United States. In the South (including Texas and Oklahoma) only 16.2 per cent of families had radios at all; taken to-gether, they amounted to a mere 11.9 per cent of the total number of radio owners in the nation. Thus the

audience to which the Chicago-based WLS was beaming at fifty thousand clear-channel watts was much larger than that of Nashville’s WSM or any of the South’s other radio barn dances. Also, the “National Barn Dance” from WLS went on the NBC Blue Net-work (sponsored by Alka-Seltzer) in 1933, a full six years before the “Grand Ole Opry’s” famous “Prince Albert Hunt Show” was carried by a national network.

How the “National Barn Dance” lost such an overwhelming advantage, —so that by 1950 it was completely overshadowed by the “Opry,” and by 1960 had disappeared from WLS—is an interesting and intricate story, and is inextricably entwined in the narra-

tive of this history. For the moment, however, it is important to see it as the reigning barn dance of this era, influencing and catering to the tastes of millions of rural Americans on a nationwide basis.

The "National Barn Dance" was the first of the barn dances to form their own Artist Service Bureau, which booked touring casts and further whetted public appetite for country music. Their tours rarely took them too far South (although Tennessee and Kentucky were not at all out of reach), but they blanketed the Midwest and not infrequently reached the mining towns of northern Minnesota and the isolated Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Although the show had decided pop elements and even pop leanings, it was the country singers—particularly Gene Autry, whose success on the station in the early 1930s was phenomenal—who were the stars, the focal points of the show.

Autry's full career will be described in Chapter Five, but his few years (1931–34) on WLS are of singular importance. His early professional career was spent in direct imitation of Jimmie Rodgers, a style with which Autry was moderately successful. After a short stint at KVOO in Tulsa, he came to WLS with an entirely new image: "Oklahoma's Yodeling Cowboy," replete with rope tricks (at which he was adept, having grown up on a ranch) and flashy outfits. No longer restricted to Rodgers-like blues, he scored with plain country songs like 1932's "Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine" (the first of his many megahits) and western numbers like "Yellow Rose of Texas" (1933) and "The

Last Roundup" (1934). His popularity rose explosively and before long Sears was selling thousands of Gene Autry Roundup guitars at \$9.95 from its catalogue (since Sears owned WLS—World's Largest Store—for its first few years, such tieups were only logical). It was Autry's WLS-developed popularity that led him to be considered as a candidate for Mascot Films' singing cowboy experiment, which in turn led to his becoming the first truly national country music star.

The WLS "National Barn Dance" dominated both its era and its area, but there were other important shows of a similar nature, even in WLS' home territory, the great Midwest. The WHO "Iowa Barn Dance Frolic," for example, began in 1932, and by 1936 had boosted its signal to the legal maximum of fifty thousand watts. The WHO show was reminiscent of WLS, featuring heavy doses of barber-shop quartets, organists, and novelty acts. On the other hand, like WLS it had an artist service bureau to book tours of its cast members, and featured as headliners a host of country entertainers, most of whom (with the exception of Zeke Clements and Texas Ruby) have drifted into obscurity. Like the "National Barn Dance" and unlike the slowly changing "Grand Ole Opry," the "Iowa Barn Dance Frolic" laid heavy emphasis on singers and singing, featuring very little instrumental string-band music. The "Iowa Barn Dance Frolic" was never able to attract the major performers necessary to make it as important as WLS, but its central midwestern location and the clear-channel power of its signal spread country

music over a broad segment of the Midwest.

Another big barn dance, launched when longtime fixture David Stone left the “Grand Ole Opry” to create and develop a barn dance in Minnesota’s twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, was the KSTP “Sunset Valley Barn Dance.” The emphasis was on the solo singers and the cowboy—the show’s stars were Billy Folger, Cactus Slim the Lonesome Serenader, Trapper Nash, Six-gun Mel, Chuck Mulhern the Flash of Rice Street, and Frank and Esther the Sweethearts of Radio—but the big fifty-thousand-watt station had goals typical of nearly every radio barn dance. As their 1943 song folio states: “Hundreds of thousands of people from all parts of the country have attended these shows and listened to the broadcasts and enjoyed to the fullest the songs of hearth and home, the breakdowns and fiddle tunes, ringing banjo melodies, harmonica blues, together with the fun and comedy of the big Saturday night jamboree.”

Two other fifty-thousand-watt stations in America’s heartland developed barn dances: KVOO in Tulsa, famous as the longtime home of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, developed a show under the direction of Herald Goodman (who had been a member of the Vagabonds on the “Grand Ole Opry”) called “Saddle Mountain Roundup.” “The Southwest’s Greatest Barn Dance,” in 1938. The stars were Goodman, singing cowboy Ray Whitley, and the fiddle team of Georgia Slim (Rutland) and Big Howdy (Forrester). Similarly, Pappy Cheshire led a gang called his



Gene Autry. Courtesy Country Music Foundation.

Hill-Billy Champions over a CBS network barn dance out of KMOX in St. Louis, Missouri. Again, the show was short on the major names that seemed ultimately to make or break a barn dance, but it did feature Decca artist Sally Foster and one of the finest yodelers to come out of the era, Skeets Yaney.



Roy Acuff (at left) and his Crazy Tennesseans. Courtesy Les Leverett Archives.

Country music and the radio barn dance, however, were not restricted to just the Southeast and the Midwest in the 1930s, for by the end of the decade there were barn dances on both the East and West coasts of the nation. In New York (where country music had been active since the days of Vernon Dalhart), Crazy Water Crystals—a company that sponsored country music nationwide all through the 1930s—had sponsored a series of shows on WMCA, starring Zeke Manners and Elton Britt, who had recently returned from California having split with the original Beverly Hillbillies. By 1935 the sponsor and the artists had moved to WHN, and two singing cowboys who had come to the Big Apple to seek their fortune were

named co-hosts: Tex Ritter and Ray Whitley, both of whom soon left for Hollywood to pursue film careers. The WHN “Barn Dance” lasted several years in all, and Manners followed it in 1938 with the “Village Barn Dance,” broadcast live from Greenwich Village. On the West Coast there was the “Hollywood Barn Dance,” hosted by Peter Potter. Gene Autry had made western music (and musical Westerns) quite a fad, and so the emphasis here was heavily on sagebrush symphonies: The show’s stars were the Sons of the Pioneers, Ray Whitley, and Smiley Burnette. This cast formed the first all-star radio cast to tour the West Coast.

There were other, smaller nonsouthern barn dances that seemed to

threaten to nearly glut the era: the WOWO "Hoosier Hop" from Fort Wayne, Indiana; the KMBC "Brush Creek Follies" from Kansas City, Missouri; the WFIL "Sleepy Hollow Ranch" from Philadelphia, and even the CKNX "Barn Dance," which originated in Wingham, Ontario. The existence of all these institutions goes to prove that country music and the barn dance were not at all exclusively southeastern or even Midwestern phenomena, but constituted a form of entertainment that appealed to rural North America as a whole.

Still, the barn dances that lasted longest are those that began in the Southeast; it was these (with the exception of the once-mighty "National Barn Dance") that supplied the nation with its country stars. Yet they too have mostly faded; today, the "Wheeling Jamboree" over WWVA and the "Grand Ole Opry" in its new home at Opryland are the sole survivors of a once strong tradition.

The whole barn-dance concept actually began in the Southwest in 1923, when WBAP in Fort Worth began its short-lived barn dance. Perhaps the scarcity of radios in the region made for the demise of the program, but it was obviously an idea whose time had come. WSB in Atlanta began its barn dance the next year, featuring the area's newfound recording star, Fiddlin' John Carson, and this show was to survive well into the 1940s. Within a couple more years WLS and WSM had started their barn dances. It is interesting that the first recording, the first million-selling record, and the formation of the three major barn dances in country music history all

happened in the years between 1922 and 1925.

WSB's "Barn Dance" originally featured Fiddlin' John Carson, the Skillet Lickers, and others, but later on shifted to more modern entertainment such as James and Martha Carson and Cotton Carrier. This kind of shift in emphasis was undertaken by all major barn dances, and the idea that it was the "Opry" that began the shift from string bands to singing stars with the coming of Roy Acuff is actually erroneous: the "Opry," in fact, was rather recalcitrant in moving to singing stars, and proved rather inept until the coming of Acuff, when it did make the effort.

For some time the general impression (not denied by Acuff himself) seems to have been that when Acuff joined the "Opry" in 1938, he brought the art of vocalizing with him, and his tremendous success marked an abrupt shift in country music tastes away from string bands toward singing stars. It is evident from a quick glance at the makeup of most of the other barn dances that by 1938 *all* of them were devoted to the singing-star format and that Acuff came extremely late to be considered a trend setter. In fact, historians like Charles K. Wolfe and Richard Peterson have, with a minimum of research, discovered that the "Opry" was well into the process of becoming a singing-star-oriented program when Acuff arrived. Acuff's role was that of the singing star with enough talent and charisma to bring it off.

The move actually began in the early 1930s, when groups like the Vagabonds, the Delmore Brothers,

and Asher and Little Jimmy Sizemore—with not a fiddle among them—were hired. The Vagabonds (composed of Dean Upson, Curt Poulton, and Herald Goodman) were a smooth-singing semipop trio who specialized in sentimental songs and who wrote one of the “Opry’s” early hits, “Lamp-lighting ‘Time in the Valley.’” Sentimental songs (with the age-old appeal of a talented child singing them) were the stock-in-trade of Asher and Little Jimmy Sizemore, and the Delmore Brothers’ careful, intricate harmony, guitar lead, and strong blues influence were far from the string-band sound. They too had an early “Opry” hit, “Brown’s Ferry Blues,” in 1933. Zeke Clements and his Broncho Busters

featuring Texas Ruby—hardly a mountain string band—joined the “Opry” in 1933, and then there were Ford Rush, a WLS alumnus, and Jack Shook and the Missouri Mountaineers, both acts joining before Acuff and featuring heavy reliance upon vocals. Following their incorporation into the “Opry” came the arrival of Pee Wee King and his Golden West Cowboys—a big, slick band featuring a cowboy image and a penchant for western songs, and, soon after joining the “Opry,” a spectacularly voiced young man called Eddy Arnold—in 1937.

Acuff, in this light, is obviously far more a part of a trend than a trend-setter. He was simply the most successful of the “Opry” vocalists, his “Great Speckled Bird,” “Wreck on the Highway,” and “Wabash Cannonball” becoming some of the biggest hits of the era. He was followed—again as a part of this trend—by Zeke Clements (“The Alabama Cowboy”) and Bill Monroe (who despite the strong instrumental tradition of bluegrass, was best known on the “Opry” for his rafter-reaching tenor voice and crackling yodels) in 1939, and they in turn were followed by a parade of vocalists who marched into the 1940s: the Williams Sisters, Clyde Moody, Ernest Tubb, Wally Fowler, Eddy Arnold, Paul Howard, Red Foley, and many more.

If the “Opry” was late in finding the singing star of national stature they sought, they were still very much in the mainstream of barn-dance practice in attempting such a move. This is not to denigrate Acuff’s importance—he literally put the “Opry” on the

*The Vagabonds.* Courtesy Doug Green.



map nationally, and it is a tribute to his tremendous popularity that after only two years on the program (a period that qualified him only as a relative rookie) he was chosen to host the "Opry's" first radio network tieup, the "Prince Albert Grand Ole Opry" in 1939, and to star in the first movie about the show, *Grand Ole Opry*, in 1940. It was not until the end of the 1940s, when Ralston Purina picked up an Opry show starring Eddy Arnold and featuring Bill Monroe, Curly Fox & Texas Ruby, Uncle Dave Macon, and Rod Brasfield for network broadcast, that the "Opry" began to challenge the "National Barn Dance" for the No. 1 national slot.

Other southeastern barn dances sprang up in the 1930s, and their histories are pretty much a repetition of the same formula: WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, for instance, began their well-known "Wheeling Jamboree" in 1933 as a string-band program, but quickly expanded in popularity with the addition of its first star vocalists, Cowboy Loye and Just Plain John the following year, who were joined by long-time favorite Doc Williams and the Border Riders in 1937.

The barn dances that began toward the end of the decade followed the then-standard formula: They featured singing stars hosting the shows, with little mention of string bands or "authentic" old-time music. WHAS in Louisville began broadcasting the "Renfro Valley Barn Dance" in 1937 with Red Foley and later Ernie Lee as hosts. (Cincinnati's "Boone County Jamboree" on WLW also had Foley as its headliner for a while, the star

obviously being as important as the format as the decade rolled along.) WRVA in Richmond, Virginia, began its "Old Dominion Barn Dance" at the close of the decade, with its longtime star Sunshine Sue at the helm. The only anachronism seemed to be the "Crazy Water Crystals Barn Dance" over WBT in Charlotte, North Carolina, which emphasized a fine string band, Mainer's Mountaineers—but even they proved most successful with Wade Mainer's vocalizing on songs like "Maple on the Hill" and "Sparkling Blue Eyes."

The 1930s, then, were marked by a tremendous proliferation of barn dances, particularly in the early part of the decade when the Depression laid low much of the record industry. In a way, the move to singing stars over string bands can be seen as a function of this very process: nostalgia-oriented string-band-heavy barn dances were valuable alternatives for the fans when recordings by Dalhart, Rodgers, the Carter Family, and others were still affordable. When the records became difficult to afford, it was more than logical that radio should step in to try to fill both needs. Barn-dance shows, still carefully maintaining that nostalgic image and flavor yet stocked with singing stars who sang the latest hits (and their own if they had them), became the order of the day.

While the barn dance is a handy reference factor, there was plenty of other national country music activity in the 1930s. In fact, the landscape of country music reflected in great measure the vast panorama that was the working America of the decade: farm-



ers, dust bowl refugees, factory workers, the elderly, the young, those entranced by show business or the magic of Hollywood or radio or record, the small-businessman, the thousands who made up rural and small-town America, who heard in the country music of the time a nostalgic return to pioneer (or at least pre-jazz) America—either that or their own feelings and emotions expressed for them with an eloquence they could not achieve themselves.

Take California, for instance. When the Sons of the Pioneers formed in 1933, with their sole emphasis on songs of the range, the plains, and the cowboy, they were commonly assumed to be Texans. In fact, their makeup was extremely diverse, demonstrating the already wide spread of country music: Bob Nolan

was a Canadian; Len Slye (Roy Rogers) was from Duck Run, Ohio; and Tim Spencer was a native of Missouri. Only the Farr Brothers (Hugh and Karl) were Texans, who had migrated to California to find work in the 1920s—and even they were hardly Texas cowboys, a major portion of their ancestry being American Indian.

The early 1930s in California found the Beverly Hillbillies, who had formed in the 1920s, still going strong, and Texan Stuart Hamblen, who had formed his Lucky Stars in California, scoring big hits with “Texas Plains” and “My Mary”—and Gene Autry’s success on the screen as a singing cowboy proved so monumental that an entire chapter of this history is devoted to the subject. Suffice it to say here that, never slow to pick up on a

*The Sons of the Pioneers.* Courtesy Bob Pinson.



money-making idea, Hollywood began cranking out hordes of these "horse operas," and a stampede of singing cowboys rushed to Hollywood from all over the country to fill the demand: Tex Ritter and Ray Whitley from New York City, Bob Baker from Colorado, Art Davis and Bill Boyd from Texas, Johnny Bond and Jimmy Wakely from Oklahoma, and Eddie Dean from Chicago. Although occasionally caught in the Hollywood glitter, these men at one time or another made some exceptionally fine country music of the era on record, on transcription, on film, or in person.

Texas, too, has made such a mark on country music that it has been assigned an entire chapter of this history. We should note here, however, that the single most impressive characteristic of Texas music in the 1930s was its diversity. Within the era, the music of Bob Wills, the Light Crust Doughboys, and Milton Brown had come to be called western swing, one of the most popular sounds in the country. Texas, moreover, had sent its share of singing cowboys to Hollywood, and yet it was also the home of two of the most popular of the gospel singing groups, the old-fashioned Stamps Quartet and the more modern Chuck Wagon Gang, who pioneered the bridging of the gap between country and gospel music.

In this era Texas produced Cajun music in the far eastern part of the state and fostered the unusual combination of western swing and Bohemian dance music in the person of San Antonio's Adolph Hofner. Honky-tonk got its start with Crisp's Ernest Tubb and Denton's Al Dexter.

Big (but not necessarily swing) bands reigned in Texas as well, Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers providing two big instrumental hits ("Under the Double Eagle" and "Lone Star Rag"), while Ted Daffan's Texans became known nationwide for Daffan compositions like "Worried Mind," "No Letter Today," "Heading Down the Wrong Highway," and the country music classic "Born to Lose." Yet solo singers like Tex Owens ("Cattle Call") and old-fashioned duets like the Shelton Brothers ("Just Because") also thrived in this region and decade.

Texas' neighboring state, Louisiana, was also active musically. Famous for the Cajun music that continues to hallmark the state's sound, it also was the home of Jimmie Davis, who started his career as a Jimmie Rodgers imitator in 1929 but who had a stream of hits on Decca Records, including "Nobody's Darling," "Sweethearts or Strangers," "It Makes No Difference Now," and of course the ubiquitous "You Are My Sunshine," in the 1930s.

Texas' neighboring nation, Mexico, managed to provide some of the most interesting, bizarre, and influential music of the decade, thanks to the so-called X stations (Mexico's radio stations were assigned the initial letter X, like the United States' W and K and Canada's C), which boomed tremendous amounts of country music over North America during the decade.

The Mexican border station era was introduced by a shady and fascinating entrepreneur named Dr. J. R. Brinkley, who lost his radio license in Milford, Kansas, because of his more-than-questionable goat-gland op-



*Bob Wills (at left) and his Texas Playboys. Courtesy Bob Pinson.*

eration designed to restore sexual potency to men. Brinkley moved to Mexico in 1930, setting up station XER at Villa Acuña, stationed right across the border from Del Rio, Texas. The main features of XER and the many other X stations that followed were country music and innumerable ads for patent medicines, geegaws, baby chicks, and the like. Bill Malone, in *Country Music U.S.A.*, quotes one of the owners of such a station as saying “[this] programming . . . was giving listeners the unsophisticated material that the big networks neglected.”

For whatever the reason, a number of important country entertainers were prominent on these border stations, either live or (more frequently) on transcriptions: The original Carter Family ended up their careers on XERA (1935–41); also featured on such stations at one time or another were the Delmore Brothers; the Pick-

ard Family; the Callahan Brothers; Mainer’s Mountaineers; J. R. Hall (“the Utah Cowboy”), Roy Faulkner (“the Lonesome Cowboy”), who moved with Brinkley from Milford to Del Rio; and the king of the border stations, Cowboy Slim Rinchart.

The reason the border stations were so influential was their tremendous range. It seems that in the early days of radio, the governments of the United States and Canada divided up the long-range broadcast band between them, leaving neither Mexico nor Cuba with any clear channels at all. Understandably miffed, the Mexican Government did not apply the fifty-thousand-watt upper limit to a station’s broadcast power stipulated by the United States and Canada, so even when WSM and WLS were at their peak, broadcasting at fifty thousand watts on a clear channel, they were no match for border stations

blasting across the entire West at two, three, and as much as ten times their power. The old story that you could tune in one of the Mexican stations simply by sticking your head up against the nearest barbed-wire fence sounds too good to be true, but it does illustrate the immense power generated from across the border. The stations came in as clear as locals well into Canada, and for those who cared to listen (and put up with the relentless advertising), they provided a fine source of often excellent (and sadly underrecorded) country music.

Another rather unlikely locale for country music was Miami, where a handsome San Antonio cowboy named Red River Dave McEnery, who kept bouncing in and out of New York City all through the decade, was the chief radio attraction. Best known in the 1930s for his "Amelia Earhart's Last Flight," he achieved notoriety in the 1970s for "The Ballad of Patty Hearst." Other local favorites of the Miami area were the Rouse Brothers, best known for their instrumental classic "Orange Blossom Special."

As far—ethnically and regionally—from Miami was Milwaukee. Although heavily influenced by the "National Barn Dance" sound, the area retained its own ethnic flavor and in the 1930s gave country music one of its best-liked characters and best songwriters: an accordionist of Polish descent who became known as Pee Wee King. He began his career in Milwaukee dance bands (his father was a polka-band leader), but, always enamored of the western image, he formed his Golden West Cowboys after apprenticing with Frankie

More's Log Cabin Boys in Louisville. Similarly, Red Blanchard, longtime fixture of the last gasps of the "National Barn Dance," got his start on several Wisconsin radio stations.

The Great Lakes provided starts for a few more entertainers: Skeets MacDonald got his start on WEXL in Royal Oak, Michigan, and WFDF in Flint, the same place from which Little Jimmy Dickens was to launch his career a few years later. In fact, the Detroit area was to be a fruitful one for country music during the war years—Ernie Lee, Jerry Byrd, and others appeared there—but only after the influx of Southerners into the war plants. Rural Michigan listened to a good deal of WLS talent, but actually produced rather little of its own.

Yet another northern industrial city had a surprising amount of country music in the 1930s: Pittsburgh's KDKA (the station famous for pioneering radio by broadcasting returns of the 1920 presidential election) featured, at one time or another in the decade, ex-Skillet Lickers Clayton McMichen and Slim Bryant, Mac and Bob, and Bradley Kincaid.

Bradley Kincaid, a Kentuckian who pioneered country music on WLS while in college in 1922, deserves a great deal of credit for opening up the Northeast to country music, for although he was with barn dances on WLS, WLW, and WSM at different times in his long career, he spent the bulk of the 1930s on WBZ in Boston, WGY in Schenectady, New York, WTIC in Hartford, Connecticut, and WHAM in Rochester, New York. His taste ran to pure mountain folk

music, and may well explain the Northeast's historic preference for that particular facet of country music, as opposed to more "modern" types. Other country music stars spent time in New England during this time as well: Grandpa Jones in Hartford, Otto Gray in Schenectady, and Yodelin' Slim Clarke in Maine.

Proceeding farther north, Canada was in those days—as it still is—a thriving country music area, although in the 1930s attention centered pretty much around three individuals: Wilf Carter, a yodeling cowboy who found fame in the United States after moving to New York City and billing himself as Montana Slim; a young Nova Scotian who first began recording in the 1930s as The Yodeling Ranger (in imitation of his idol Jimmie Rodgers, the Yodeling Brakeman), Hank Snow; and Don Messer, a fiddler who led a large semipop dance band he called his Islanders, because of their association with CFCY on Prince Edward Island.

Perhaps the most surprising of all, however, was the activity in New York City, where a considerable amount of country music was heard locally, on network and local radio and on records, during the 1930s. Those who were there at the time say it was definitely an uphill battle for acceptance, but there appeared to be at least enough interest for a country music "scene" to thrive throughout the decade. For one thing, New York City was left with the legacy of Vernon Dalhart and Carson J. Robison, both of whom were still quite influential as the decade opened. Early in the period, Frank Luther and Zora Layman,

Zeke Manners, Ray Whitley, Tex Ritter, and Elton Britt came to the Big Apple, many of them appearing on WMCA, which had a six-city hookup ranging as far north as Boston and as far south as Washington, D.C. Rex Cole's Mountaineers had a long-running show on a rival station, and when WHN began their "Barn Dance," they dipped deeply into this pool of talent, hiring as co-host the young Texan who was aspiring toward a career on the Broadway stage, Tex Ritter.

Wilf Carter (as Montana Slim) proved a success on network radio, and Denver Darling became a long-time fixture of the scene, introducing superyodeler Rosalie Allen (herself from Old Forge, Pennsylvania) late in the decade. Perhaps the most interesting of the New York City musicians, though, was a young Okie who apprenticed on radio in California, where he became increasingly sympathetic to the plight of his fellow migrants, drifting through the Depression as described in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Becoming increasingly political, Woody Guthrie left behind his country-singer aspirations (which his cousin Jack did not, becoming a popular country singer of the 1940s) and moved to New York, where he became the darling of the socially conscious set and the founder of a whole movement of American music quite on his own. More than any of the self-conscious folk singers to come out of the 1940s, Woody Guthrie's roots as a 1930s country singer were quite evident, nowhere more than in the many melodies taken directly from Carter Family songs to which he wrote

his own words, for example, “Wildwood Flower” becoming “Reuben James,” and “Little Darling Pal of Mine” becoming “This Land Is Your Land.”

The other area where country music was surprisingly strong—as surprising, in a way, as New York City—was the Great Plains. Eddie and Jimmie Dean, for instance, played stints in Yankton, South Dakota (WNAX), and Topeka, Kansas (WIBW), before heading to Hollywood, and Bill and Charlie Monroe worked Shenandoah, Iowa, and Grand Island, Nebraska, before heading to the area of their greatest fame, Charlotte, North Carolina. The Willis Brothers played in such far-flung outposts as Shawnee, Oklahoma, and Gallup, New Mexico, while Dr. Brinkley, as noted, pioneered country music in Milford, Kansas, using the talents of Fiddlin’ Bob Larkin and Roy Faulkner (“the Lonesome Cowboy”) between pitches for his goat-gland operation. The reason why there wasn’t more local country music actually was twofold: the fifty-thousand-watt power of WLS beaming in from the Midwest and the fantastic coverage of the hundred-thousand-watt-plus border stations to the south. Given the small and widely scattered population and a half-dozen radio stations that could be picked up as well or better than local five-hundred- or five-thousand watters, there was little need for the local stations at all, and in fact they were scarce in the Great Plains in the 1930s.

Finally, regarding regional diversity in country music, it is interesting to look at the rise of country music parks—now a widespread phenomenon, and

in a sense the precursor of the outdoor bluegrass festivals currently in vogue. Probably the first outdoor park was opened by Buck and Tex Ann Nation, a couple of New York City country music personalities, in 1934. This was the C-Bar-C Ranch in Pennsylvania, a state that has always been among the most active in its support of country music. Four other parks—Sleepy Hollow Ranch, Sunset Park, Himmelreich’s Grove, and Ravine Park—opened up in the area shortly thereafter and, significantly enough, when the Nations decided to relocate the C-Bar-C Ranch in 1941, their move was not to the south, but north to Maine. It was not until 1948, in fact, that such parks began opening in the Southeast, perhaps the most famous being Roy Acuff’s Dunbar Cave near Clarksville, Tennessee, and Bill Monroe’s Bean Blossom near Nashville, Indiana.

In short, the point is that country music was a nationwide phenomenon in the Depression-to-World War II era, not something introduced to Northerners by southern soldiers or defense workers, as has been commonly assumed (although, of course, this kind of interaction took place as well).

Regional diversity, however, was not the most impressive or even the most important characteristic of the decade: rather, it was the surge of creativity in all regions, seemingly all at once, that made for the staggering musical diversity of the period. It is little wonder, considering that this widespread diversity allowed for nearly every taste, from crude to slick, from blues to pop, from Anglo-American

ballad to big-band instrumental, from fiddle breakdowns to modern love songs, that the music spread so widely.

The decade began with the four major strains discussed earlier; they soon evolved and branched into a dozen or more. In the overview, the influence of Jimmie Rodgers was perhaps the most powerful of all; it must be remembered that the Mississippi Blue Yodeler spent a full half of his short six-year professional career in the

1930s a major portion of his most influential records coming after 1930 (although the effects of the Depression curtailed his total sales, as they did those of every other artist).

Of his songs, it has to be said that some are so rooted in their own time as to be hopelessly dated, while others are American classics. Probably his greatest legacy was his influence on young up-and-coming singers, who adopted his blues style before devel-

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*Jimmie Rodgers.*



oping their own. His black-derived twelve-bar blue yodels were tremendously influential and frequently heard in the early part of the decade—far more, in fact, than his sentimental songs.

Gene Autry, for example, perfected the Rodgers style to the degree that their voices are virtually indistinguishable on record, and in fact the first hit record of many in Autry's long career was "Blue Yodel No. 5." Jimmie Davis was also a blue yodeler at first, recording such racy items as "Tom Cat and Pussy Blues" for Victor (Rodgers' own label!) long before his association with Decca. Bill Carlisle's first popular record was a blues called "Rattlesnake Daddy," and it is well known that both Ernest Tubb and Hank Snow were first influenced by Rodgers yodeling blues. That so many of the following decades' most influential performers began as blues yodelers is a testimony to the massive popularity of Jimmie Rodgers and his popularization of the blues; the fact that in every instance each of these Rodgers devotees went on to develop their own highly individualized styles is further testimony to the creativity of this most creative of decades.

The legacy of Ralph Peer's other August 1927 discovery, the Carter Family, also remained strong throughout the 1930s, although the Carters themselves, because they did not devote themselves to touring or the other necessities of show business, remained merely popular, not spectacularly so. Their main contribution to the music of the 1930s was their songs, which were obligatory in the repertoire of nearly every country act or singer of

the era, particularly in the Southeast. Also, the remarkable and innovative guitar style of Maybelle Carter, who above any other single performer encouraged the use of the guitar as a lead instrument among aspiring musicians, was a powerful factor.

There was, in addition, a solo-singer tradition held over from the 1920s that was quite apart from the Jimmie Rodgers style and that is too often forgotten when the credit for turning commercial country music from an instrumental into a vocal form is meted out. Rodgers tends to get all the credit for this rapid reversal of trends, and while the magnitude of his popularity cannot be underplayed, there was a long and influential tradition of solo singers before he ever recorded, from Henry Whitter to Kelly Harrell to Carl T. Sprague to Bradley Kincaid. The king of them all, of course, was Vernon Dalhart, who sold millions of records and recorded thousands of sides under more than a hundred different pseudonyms. The importance of these men (with the exception of Kincaid) diminished in the 1930s, but the tradition they popularized and helped found continued with great vitality: During the 1930s, singers like Wilf Carter, Stuart Hamblen, Zeke Clements, Red Foley, Bob Miller, Tex Ritter, and many others emerged out of a solo-singing tradition (or traditions) quite removed from that of the Mississippi Blue Yodeler.

The fourth musical form at its peak when the decade began was the string band, a sound and a style that were to diminish alarmingly as the decade advanced. The most popular sounds





*Arthur Smith and Jimmy Wakely. Courtesy Doug Green.*

of the 1920s—provided by the Skillet Lickers, the Leake County Revelers, Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, and others—receded very quickly in the face of the onslaught of singers and “stars.” In the Southwest, fiddle-band music was quickly transmogrified by its rapid exposure (largely, again, due to radio) to pop, jazz, and blues into western swing; in the Northeast (with the exception of some holdouts in Canada) it disappeared entirely. Only in the musically conservative Southeast did the tradition survive, but we’ve already seen how rapidly the “Opry” moved away from the fiddle-band format by as early as 1933, and in fact the four major fiddle bands that have endured

the “Opry’s” history (two, in fact, are still on the show) were members of the cast by the late 1920s. None has been added since. A couple of these southeastern fiddle bands, Arthur Smith and the Dixieliners and Main-er’s Mountaineers, were able to achieve record-selling popularity in the 1930s (although many others, including the Skillet Lickers, were to remain local radio favorites).

Smith’s sound was bluesy and unique, and he left a very important legacy to country music in his soulful fiddle style. He was assisted—at least in his years on the “Opry”—by two of the ablest old-time musicians in the business, Sam and Kirk McGee. A more versatile (and ambitious) man

than his early Bluebird records and "Opry" appearances may have made him appear, Smith later went on to lead the backup band in several of Jimmy Wakely's singing cowboy films, playing surprisingly hot fiddle and even singing a tune or two.

Mainer's Mountaineers came out of North Carolina and were headed by the two Mainer brothers, a fiddler who went by his initials J.E., and his banjo-playing younger brother Wade, whose sprightly two-finger banjo style presaged the bluegrass music of a decade later. Although they were a fine breakdown fiddle band of the old school, Wade's banjo playing gave them a distinctive sound, and his clear, strong, evocative mountain voice was the factor that really accounted for the popularity of the band (at least on record). As Mainer's Mountaineers they had several popular records, among them "Wreck of the No. 9" and an old Carter Family gem, "Maple on the Hill." As brother acts often will, they eventually split, and Wade Mainer, with a new band called the Sons of the Mountaineers, was one of the last of the string bands to have a major hit record in the 1930s: "Sparkling Blue Eyes" in 1939. It is a fine performance of a fine song, and its success in that year is even more remarkable considering that it competed against a host of much more modern and slick records: Bob Wills' "San Antonio Rose," Autry's "Back in the Saddle Again," and Jimmie Davis' "It Makes No Difference Now."

The only string band to stay strong in the thirties and outlast Wade Mainer into the forties (although

Mainer was active in that period, recording a host of fine sides for King) was one that achieved popularity late in the decade: Roy Acuff's Smokey Mountain Boys. But like Mainer's band, the emphasis was heavily on the singing. That Acuff, a tremendously popular singing star by 1940, should have chosen an old-fashioned string band for backup says more about him than it does about his success—he had the voice and the material that were right for the times, and would probably have been a success on record with any unobtrusive backing. In all fairness, however, he had long been a champion of traditional mountain

*Mainer's Mountaineers.* Courtesy Doug Green.



music, and he did have a superb old-time band whose powerful in-person musical and comedic effects were great aids to his stage shows.

While Acuff and the others mentioned above continued the pre-1930s traditions, however, others were at work developing the music. This, in fact, was the main thrust of the thirties.

There was, for example, the development of the mandolin-guitar duet style in old-timey music. Before 1930 there was very little of this tradition, the only significant activity being that of two blind musicians named Lester MacFarland and Robert Gardner, known professionally over WLS as Mac and Bob. Their simple, homey (though slightly stiff) sound—old or old-sounding songs, sung in harmony, accompanied by rhythm guitar, with the mandolin playing brief turn-arounds between verses—was, however, tremendously influential, and they were quickly followed at WLS by Karl and Harty (whose full names were Karl Davis and Hartford Connecticut Taylor), who played basically the same style, but composed some of the best and most successful traditionally oriented songs of the decade: “I’m Just Here to Get My Baby out of Jail,” “The Prisoner’s Dream,” and “Kentucky.”

The effects of this music were not lost on two Kentucky youngsters working in Chicago-area refineries, who eventually went with the WLS road show not as musicians but as square dancers in the early 1930s. They were Charlie and Bill Monroe, who created some of the most innovative, exciting, and certainly most popular duet music



*The Monroe Brothers.* Courtesy Doug Green.

of the middle 1930s. Bill’s mandolin work, in fact, revolutionized the use of the instrument entirely—after his powerful, energy-charged, and lightning-fast solos were spread around on record, the instrument graduated from simple turn-around work to being a virtuoso instrument in and of itself.

Although Monroe himself continued to develop so rapidly as a musician that to this day, nobody has really been able to challenge his mastery of the instrument, he was challenged in the thirties. The challenger was Jethro Burns of Homer and Jethro, whose popular cornball humor sometimes effectively disguised brilliant and sophisticated musicianship. Jethro’s mandolin style—syncopated, rhythmic, heavily influenced by jazz, and spacing notes in short, trumpetlike

bursts—differed radically from Bill’s approach, which was smooth, fluid, and above all played at a breakneck pace that left other musicians in awe.

The Monroe Brothers were popular for more reasons than Bill’s revolutionary use of the mandolin, however. Their singing was high and forceful, and they played a great many of their tunes at racing tempos, a stirring contrast to the deliberate pace that characterized most contemporary duets. Their voices did not express as much feeling—in the sense that the country singer uses that word—as musical excitement, an excitement in the music they were creating and an implicit challenge to others to try to top them (nobody ever accused either brother of being short of ego). Much of this same feeling pervades bluegrass (which Bill was to create after the Monroe Brothers split up in 1938) today. Although the Monroe Brothers recorded for only two short years (1936–38), much of their material influenced old-time and bluegrass bands of the future profoundly. They had one considerable hit record, “What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?” in 1936.

The Blue Sky Boys (Bill and Earl Bolick) were influenced by the Monroe Brothers very directly—Bill Bolick was forced to take up the mandolin simply because of the many listener requests to feature the instrument, so greatly had Bill Monroe popularized it—but their approach to the same form and type of music was radically different from that of the Monroes. Concentrating on religious songs, sentimental songs, and some exceedingly lovely Anglo-American ballads, their

tempos were slow and their voices were mournful, and they produced some of the most haunting music of the era. In fact, Bill Bolick has made some revealing comments about the audience they played to in the Depression-wracked South of the time: “People ask, ‘Why did you sing so many sad songs?’ Well, people weren’t in the mood to hear a bunch of crazy junk all the time. There wasn’t a heck of a lot of happiness then.” The Blue Sky Boys were one of the few duets to remain popular throughout the 1940s (they officially retired in 1951), although World War II disrupted their career for five full years.

Another duet that first achieved popularity in the 1930s and managed to maintain it well into the next decade was the Callahan Brothers. Like the Blue Sky Boys, Homer and Walter Callahan were from North Carolina, but unlike the Bolicks, who never compromised their material, the Callahans adapted with the times. Moving steadily westward (Asheville, Knoxville, Cincinnati, Louisville, Tulsa), they settled in Texas, changed their names to Bill and Joe, and made a career playing the more swingy music of that region well into the 1950s. It is fascinating that the two duet teams that lasted the longest were those that used entirely different means to accomplish it: one, the Blue Sky Boys, holding a loyal following by refusing to adapt; the other, the Callahan Brothers, by adapting skillfully to changing tastes and regions.

Although there were several other fine duet teams—the Morris Brothers, the Shelton Brothers, the Allen Brothers—two youngsters from Limestone



*The Blue Sky Boys with Red Hicks. Courtesy Doug Green.*

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County, Alabama, named Alton and Rabon Delmore formed the only 1930s duet team to gain contemporary parity with the Monroes, the Blue Sky Boys, and the Callahans. Among the first of the transition groups on the "Grand Ole Opry" who attempted to make a living at their music, they created an eclectic style with elements of blues, boogie, hymns, and old-time country. The opposite of the rural string bands, their music (played on rhythm and lead tenor guitar) was intricate, precise, smooth, and polished. They were among the first of the soft singers, and as Charles K. Wolfe points out in his *The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years*, their acceptance as soft singers was made possible by

technological improvements in microphones. They were extremely popular both on the "Opry" and after they left it, and their controlled, careful approach to performance set high musical standards that other duets and bands attempted to emulate. They were also prolific songwriters; "Brown's Ferry Blues," "Freight Train Boogie," "Blues Stay Away from Me," and many other classics came from their pens.

More than most of the other musical forms of the decade, the mandolin-guitar (or, in the case of the Delmores, the guitar-guitar) duet was based, in sound and repertoire, on traditional forms. Most of the other new music of the 1930s was more innovative, but

even so, all of it relied heavily on the country music with which the nation entered the decade. For instance, western swing music—the history of which is detailed in Chapter Four—was a merging of the fiddle-band tradition with the jazz feel and repertoire of Jimmie Rodgers, with the addition of drums, brass, and reeds from pop music, the newly developed electric and steel guitars, and the psychological need for Depression-era rural America to get up and dance.

Similarly, the cowboy songs that originally came out of Texas were the very real bases for the traditionally oriented cowboy hits of the early 1930s: “Texas Plains,” “The Strawberry Roan,” and others. To this was added a suddenly booming film industry which, caught in the tremendous demand for singing-cowboy films, needed original cowboy songs badly. Into this void stepped many talented songwriters who, taking traditional cowboy songs as bases, wrote many of the classics of the era: Johnny Bond (“Cimarron”), Ray Whitley (“Back in the Saddle Again”), Eddie Dean (“Banks of the Sunny San Juan”), Tim Spencer (“Rainbow over the Range”), Jimmy Wakely (“Song of the Sierras”), Foy Willing (“Sing Me a Song of the Prairie”), Johnny Marvin (“Rainbow on the Rio Colorado”) and even Fred Rose, who before his celebrated move to Nashville wrote dozens of songs for Gene Autry movies, one of which—“Be Honest with Me”—was nominated for an Oscar. Another Tin Pan Alley songwriter, Billy Hill, deserves a good bit of the credit for getting the whole western song boom rolling, for his

pop-oriented western songs quickly became cowboy classics: “Wagon Wheels,” “The Last Roundup,” and the like.

No mention of western songwriters would be half complete without the name Bob Nolan, one of the handful of the truly great country songwriters. It is a shame, in a way, that a songwriter’s greatness is too often tied to number of record sales, for Bob Nolan’s greatness has been partially hidden because western songs, despite their popularity on the screen, have traditionally been unexceptional sellers on record. And Bob Nolan’s songs have, in overwhelming proportions, been western in theme. Still, no other country songwriter outside of Hank Williams and Fred Rose (together and apart) has come up with so many songs of such exquisite lyric and mel-

Bob Nolan. Courtesy Bob Pinson.



ody. Among the most memorable of the hundreds of his compositions are "Cool Water," "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," "A Cowboy Has to Sing," "Way Out There," "I Still Do," "Love Song of the Waterfall," "Blue Prairie," "Song of the Bandit," "Chant of the Wanderer," and "When Payday Rolls Around." Without question, Nolan is one of the underrated geniuses of country music.

Honky-tonk music was another form that developed in the 1930s. Like western swing, its creation and development are inextricably entwined with the state of Texas, and are dealt with in detail in the following chapter. Although the music achieved its greatest popularity in the 1940s and the 1950s, its roots are firmly planted in the late 1930s, when Al Dexter ("Honky-tonk Blues"), and Ted Daffan ("Headin' Down the Wrong Highway" and "Born to Lose") began to explore the problems that would so obsess postwar America. It was also in the Texas of the thirties that Ernest Tubb developed the honky-tonk style he would bring to the "Grand Ole Opry" in 1942, popularizing it in the Southeast as well as in the Southwest.

Cajun music also took its first steps toward national prominence in the 1930s, although it too had roots going back to the 1920s and long before. In one sense it was being influenced—modernizing, in a way—with the mixing in of instruments associated with western swing and other musical forms outside Cajun culture during the thirties, but at the same time it was influencing the musical styles in areas that surrounded it. The band that best symbolized this emergence

was the Hackberry Ramblers, which was probably the first and certainly the most popular Cajun band to mix other musical styles and repertoires with their traditional folk music. Recording western swing, pop, jazz, and straight-ahead country in a unique mixture of string band and traditional Cajun sound, they sang both in English and in Cajun French. Their popularity was regional, but at the same time their music was both influenced by and influential to the broader scope of country music and of American music in general.

Another ethnic music that played a role in the country music in the 1930s—albeit smaller and even more localized than Cajun—was the music of Mexico. Just as record companies formed budget-priced sublabels for blues and country (or, as they called these genres, "race" and "hillbilly"), they also had sublabels for Mexican recordings. For instance, Bluebird, a sublabel for Victor, had a subsublabel for their Mexican series, the lovely and familiar buff-and-blue Bluebird label remaining the same in design but changing colors to buff and light green. The influence of the Mexican recordings was far from overwhelming, but they were very popular along the Texas border. They had a definite influence on western swing musicians who grew up in southern Texas, and made a distinct addition to the western swing repertoire, the standards "Cielito Lindo" and "La Golondrina" being the most famous of the Mexican tunes.

At the other end of the scale from these ethnic musics was the increasingly important self-conscious folk

music beginning to appear among intellectuals and activists in New York City. These people were the first urbanites to succumb to the spell of what today might be called the John Denver syndrome among city dwellers: a romantic and unrealistic longing for country life and its supposed simplicity. Spurred on by the arrival of Woody Guthrie in 1938, urban folk music flourished, with singers like Burl Ives, Cisco Houston, and later Pete Seeger joining the fray. Although heavily political in overtone, this self-conscious folk music genuinely introduced thousands to folk, country, and country-like music, although the strength of this introduction was not to be felt until some twenty years later, when the legacy left by these people erupted in the "folk-song revival" of the late 1950s. This revival—the intellectuals' reaction to rock 'n' roll—had a tremendous revitalizing effect on traditionally oriented country music, and the effects are still very much in evidence.

While urban folk music was in its early stages an entirely different musical form was being born, and it too began to flourish in and outside the Southeast. This was country-oriented gospel music, music based on and taken from the hymns of the old Vaughan or Stamps-Baxter singing schools, then modified and blended with traditional country music styles. It was a trend that was to accelerate rapidly in the 1940s, but its original boom began in the 1930s with a group called the Chuck Wagon Gang. Although their first couple of sessions featured nonreligious songs ("Take Me Back to Renfro Valley," "Okla-

homa Blues"), their repertoire from then to the present has been exclusively religious in nature. Their music, however, has always featured guitar, mandolin, and other instruments not at all associated with the traditional quartet-and-piano sound of gospel music. In this the Chuck Wagon Gang was unique, and this can be seen as a direct result of southwestern influences. While the repertoire of most southeastern bands was heavily dominated by religious material, the southwestern bands were different; twenty-eight of the Monroe Brothers' sixty recorded songs were sacred in nature, but Bob Wills recorded only one sacred song in his entire career, and the rare sacred songs of the singing cowboys were not traditional hymns but new compositions that reflected the outlook of the synthetic screen characters and/or a romanticized west. The Chuck Wagon Gang, operating mostly in the Southwest, was musically in tune with the country music of the Southwest, but lyrically sacred in the southeastern tradition.

A final innovative byway taken by country music in the 1930s was one we tend to think of as strictly a modern phenomenon (which goes hand in hand with the other common misconceptions about the regionality and supposed purity of country music in the era): the singer-songwriter. As country music became a real business in the 1920s, with more and more bands and singers recording, the limited reservoir of traditional material simply ran out. Also, as the nostalgia-oriented barn dances became more and more a showcase for the emerg-





*The Chuck Wagon Gang. Courtesy Charles Wolfe.*

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ing stars, the public demand for new individualized material from these stars increased.

Jimmie Rodgers had enlisted the songwriting help of his sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams in the 1920s, and Carson J. Robison had migrated to

New York City from Kansas mainly to become a songwriter, beginning a long and fruitful association with Vernon Dalhart upon his arrival. Dalhart's 1925 recording "The Death of Floyd Collins" had sparked a (still thriving) tradition of "event songs,"

and this too was part of the impetus toward more and more new original material. In fact, many of the biggest stars of the thirties wrote, co-wrote, or bought the material that made them famous; Gene Autry's "That Silver-haired Daddy of Mine" and Jimmie Davis's "Nobody's Darling" and "You Are My Sunshine" were examples of this phenomenon. Other popular bands and singers featured a high percentage of new material written by themselves; Bob Wills and Roy Acuff are good examples. Also, singer/songwriters like Rex Griffin ("The Last Letter") began to come to the fore, and it was in this area that Bob Nolan forged an entire country music genre almost single-handedly and Red River Dave began his career of "event songs" with "Amelia Earhart's Last Flight."

Country music in the 1930s, then, was nothing if not diverse—diverse in region, diverse in sound, diverse in personality. It was indeed the most creative single decade in the music's history. Yet for all this remarkable creativity, there were a great number of things that tremendously influenced and changed the music that were not in any way related to the genius of individual musicians or the greatness of certain bands. There were a host of interrelated technological innovations and business decisions that abruptly changed and altered the course of country music many times in many ways. An examination of country music in the 1930s would not be complete without at least a cursory look at technology and economics.

The influence of radio in the Depression has already been seen as a

factor of primary importance in spreading the sound of country music, as much in the Midwest as in the South. In fact, the technological innovations of radio and record may well in themselves account for the tremendous surge of creativity that characterized the 1930s, for suddenly, aspiring musicians were able to hear varieties of music vaster and broader than they had ever imagined. As an example, Bob Wills' Texas Playboys recall that in their barnstorming days in the 1930s when they played the radio it was not to listen to country songs—those they knew well enough—but to tune in fresh and inspiring big bands and blues singers. Radio and records suddenly disseminated an enormous quantity and variety of music an open-minded musician was quick to use as building blocks for his development as a musician and eventually synthesize into his own style.

The increasing sensitivity of microphones during the 1930s was also a factor in changing the style of both radio and records. Combined with improvements in home receivers and speakers, this development made it possible for relatively low-volume, subtle singing to be recorded successfully and reproduced as adequately as louder, more dramatic singing. Thus during the thirties, the big-voiced exhortative singers of the 1920s (the Carters and Dalhart, for example) gave way to the gentler singers like Autry and the Blue Sky Boys. The shift in style was as much a result of improving technology as it was a product of musical creativity or changing public taste.

Nowhere is the implication of tech-

nology more evident than in the development of electric string instruments, which by the end of the decade radically changed the sound of country music. Although the technology needed to produce electric instruments was advanced enough by 1925 that an ex-Gibson engineer named Lloyd Loar marketed electric violins, mandolins, and basses, electric pickups on guitars weren't really used in pop, jazz, or country music until the middle 1930s. It is generally held that Bob Dunn, the innovative jazz-oriented steel guitarist for Milton Brown's Musical Brownies, first attached a crude pickup to his Martin Hawaiian guitar, thus bringing the electric steel guitar to western swing and eventually to all of country music. Leon McAuliffe of the Texas Playboys was not slow to follow Dunn's lead, and soon the sound of the electric steel was as indigenous to country music as that of the fiddle.

It was in the late 1930s that the electric guitar—played upright, as opposed to the steel—got hooked up as well, and soon western swing bands were all featuring electric rhythm and lead (which, like the steel, was not pioneered but popularized by another Texas Playboy, in this case Eldon Shamblin). Again, this sound spread rapidly to country music at large.

The spread of country music can be attributed to yet another set of technological advances: the increasingly well-built automobiles and the improved roads on which to drive them. For both band and fan, the simple existence of well-made cars and good roads made extensive touring both practical and profitable: The performer could better reach his public,

and, as importantly, his public could reach him as well.

The greatest economic/technological factors in country music's rapid spread during the thirties, however, were the new media, radio and records. Radio's sudden boom period was in large part due to the inability of a large segment of the population to purchase luxuries like records, which at the time sold for \$.75 each, with some artists commanding as high as \$1.25 per disc. Before the Depression, certain sublabels sold for as low as \$.25, but not until 1934 did a brand-new company called Decca settle on a price of \$.35 per disc, seriously undercutting the other labels since they featured their first-line artists (Bing Crosby, for example) at this price. This was a major breakthrough, which had an immediate effect on the rapid, healthy growth of the Decca company and put considerable pressure on the other labels to also cut their prices (Victor's Bluebird line, originally a reissue label, suddenly became the haven for their country, blues, and dance bands, and came out with a purchase price of, you guessed it, \$.35). Decca had a healthy country catalogue throughout the 1930s (Jimmie Davis, Tex Ritter, Rex Griffin, Milton Brown, the Carter Family, the Shelton Brothers, Eddie Dean, the Sons of the Pioneers), but their main contribution was in driving the price of popular records down, making them affordable to the segment of the public that had given them up as an unnecessary luxury. Decca's move revitalized a sagging industry, and once again the important singers and groups of the era were recorded extensively on wax.

A second major reason for the re-

vitalization of the once nearly moribund record industry (and one that gave a strong boost to western swing and virtually gave birth to honky-tonk) was the development and promotion of the jukebox, which shortly after its introduction around 1935 became a national institution in taverns, truck stops, and restaurants. Jukebox operators bought thousands of records mainly western swing, for the big beat was easily heard on the contraption—and it did not take long before songs aimed at the jukebox's listeners appeared: Al Dexter's "Honky-tonk Blues" (1937) and Ted Daffan's "Truck Driver's Blues" (1939). The jukeboxes not only bolstered the record industry, but also did a lot to shape, change, and inspire an increasingly large part of country music style, taste, and form for years to come.

A third reason for the revitalization of the record business has to do with the playing of records over the radio, a phenomenon taken totally for granted today but one that met with intense resistance in its day. In fact, for years radio and records considered themselves rivals for the public's entertainment dollar, and often bitter rivals at that. Each side was resistant and competitive, their last thought that of co-operation. Radio saw its advantages lying in its spontaneity, having no need for anything so mechanical as records, while the record industry saw air play of their records simply as lost sales: Why would anyone buy a product they could hear for free? Hence the small print found on numerous records of the 1930s:

"Not Licensed For Radio Broadcast."

In the late 1930s, somewhere around 1937–38, this began to change. Radio men discovered the obvious economic advantages of paying one man to spin records rather than paying half a dozen to sing the same hit songs, and record men found, quite to their surprise, that far from damaging sales, air play boosted sales tremendously. Suddenly the record and radio industries, adversaries since 1920, found themselves scratching each other's backs. The result was greater profit for radio stations and greater profits and sales for the record companies. The proliferation of labels in the years that followed was a direct result of this Johnny-come-lately co-operation. The only people who lost out were the poor live musicians, who increasingly had to become recording artists to succeed.

With all these creative and technological changes conspiring together, the 1930s was truly a hotbed decade for country music. It was a decade that demanded, and received, escapist entertainment and dreamy musical romanticism, and the sources for the music were scattered all across the nation. The road to Nashville was embarked upon during this decade, but it was a road that came out of a thousand different paths. It was not until the "Prince Albert Show," featuring Roy Acuff and the Smokey Mountain Boys, went on network radio in 1939 that the "Grand Ole Opry" and the city of Nashville began to indicate their future dominance of the country music field.

## *Music from the Lone Star State*

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Now, Texas is a big state: big in area, big in population. Still, its contributions to country music over the fifty-odd years of its recording history are far greater than its large size and numerous inhabitants.

There is a lot of talk these days about “Texas music”—its popularity has created a full-fledged cottage industry for journalists—but too often that talk ignores the fact that Texas music has been influencing country music from the very beginning. The list of accomplishments by sons and daughters of the Lone Star State is enormous, and includes the first country music recording, the first country music million seller, and five of the thirty members of the Country Music Hall of Fame: Autry, Reeves, Ritter, Tubb, and Wills. And Texas has produced major stars in every major form of country music with the exception of bluegrass, and has been the birth-

place of many of them: singing cowboys, honky-tonk, and western swing.

Why the Lone Star State has produced such a magnificent lineup of country music’s major stars, from Eck Robertson and Vernon Dalhart right on up to the creative, energetic Austin scene and the world-reknowned Willie Nelson Fourth of July Picnic, is a matter for conjecture. Regardless of the reasons, real or supposed, Texas’ current vanguard position is not at all new to the state. It has been in the forefront of country music from the beginning.

Ethnic diversity, in and of itself, does not make for a thriving country music heritage; if it did, New York, Detroit, and Chicago would be active country music centers. But there is, on the other hand, little doubt that many musical cultures were influential in the development of Texas music. The state is a melting pot of vari-



*A Texas couple listening to the radio.* Courtesy Charles Wolfe.

ous ethnic strains, many of which survive even today, many of which were incorporated into Texas music, the variety called “western swing” in particular.

The most obvious of these ethnic strains and influences, the one that is the foundation for all of country music, is the Appalachian musical tradition of Anglo-American folk song and minstrelsy, a tradition brought over from the mountains of the Southeast to the plains of Texas by its first settlers. These musical ancestors of both Bob Wills and Bill Boyd were, like Davy Crockett and Sam Houston before them, transplanted Tennesseans. With them these settlers brought

their fiddles, songs, hymns, and love of square dancing, and given this background—although time has altered the style—it is little wonder that the fiddle tradition was (and is) so strong in Texas. Bob Wills, for all his audible and visual antics, was a prize-winning old-time fiddler: his first-rate old-time fiddling was merely upstaged by the hot jazz of the super fiddlers he loved to employ.

This influence from the Southeast was far from a pre-1900 phenomenon, either: A popular mountain duet along the lines of the Monroe Brothers or the Blue Sky Boys named Homer and Walter Callahan were North Carolinians by birth and upbringing, but like

many others of their era became enchanted with western music. In their early years they played in groups like the Cliff Dwellers and Frankie More's Log Cabin Boys; later they toured with singing cowboys Ray Whitley and Jimmy Wakely, and ended up their career in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Texas, among the stars of the "Big D Jamboree" in Dallas, where by then, for some peculiar reason, they had changed their names to Bill and Joe.

Of course, southeastern mountain-style fiddling and singing were far from the only influences. Texas has long had a heavy settlement of German, Bohemian, and other central European peoples, who brought their love of polkas, schottisches, and waltzes with them, forever to become associated with Texas music. In fact, it is they who left the squeeze-box accordion, a small affair capable of but one key and two chords, with the Cajuns on their way through Louisiana to Texas in the nineteenth century, contributing to the rich, distinctive sound of that musical style. At any rate, the German and Slavic influence has been especially strong in south-central Texas, where waltzes and polkas have been perennially popular among country bands and country fans.

The classic case is Adolph Hofner of San Antonio, still an extremely busy entertainer playing four to five days a week, never venturing across the state line. Hofner's career goes back to the 1930s and is thoroughly western swing in outline, but throughout he has recorded and performed in Bohemian as well as English, and one of his big-

gest records, "Green Meadow Waltz," was sung in Bohemian. Today his band includes trumpets, fiddles, and accordions, and he blithely says, "If they want mariachi we give them that; if they want the Slavic we give them that; and if they want plain country we give them that too." He shrugs off his role as a living example of the mixing of three rich musical cultures in the music of Texas. The mixed tradition continues to this day with other performers: Young RCA recording artist Dottsy (real surname Brodt, the German word for bread) is from proud old German central Texas stock.

The Cajun of Louisiana, which owes at least the accordion to the German immigrants, has been another strong influence on the music of Texas, especially the bordering area of southeastern Texas. Cajun music was and is extremely popular in southeastern Texas, as popular as in the bayou country, and in fact the legendary Cajun fiddler Harry Choates spent most of his time in Texas: He did the majority of his recording in Houston, and died in the Austin jail in 1951. A Hank Williams-like figure, Choates died after a short, wild life at the age of twenty-eight, a regional celebrity, especially after his 1946 hit "Jole Blon."

Several figures moved interchangeably between the worlds of Texas and Cajun music: Moon Mullican was a country star, a swing pianist, a blues singer, and one of his hits was "Jole Blon," which was also a hit for Red Foley and Roy Acuff and a bigger one yet for Choates. And the music itself was mixed and mingled as well, for while "Opry" singers sang "Jole Blon"

in traditional Nashville style, Harry Choates borrowed instruments and styles from western swing, and one extraordinarily popular Cajun band of the 1930s, the Hackberry Ramblers, used instrumentation similar to southeastern string bands of the same era, with, of course, the exception that they sang in that curious patois known as Cajun French. And they were unafraid to venture outside familiar musical genres: One of their more popular records was "Fais Pas Ca," simply a Cajun version of the old blues classic "Trouble in Mind."

So Cajun gave to and took from country music in general and Texas music in particular, adding yet another ingredient to the rich ethnic stew that composes its sound.

Another such ingredient was the Norteño music of northern Mexico, which lent its distinctive sound to a region obviously eager to accept and adapt differing musical sounds. Aspiring musicians growing up in southern Texas were bound to be affected by this music, if not for its own compelling musical merits, then simply by having been so surrounded by it.

Different from the mariachi brass sound, which also had a profound effect on Texas music, the Norteño market was treated by the major labels much like "race" and "hillbilly" music were in their infancy, with specialty sublabels manufactured specifically for the Tex-Mex audience. Victor's lovely buff-and-blue Bluebird label, for example, was a familiar sight to most country record buyers, who picked up the Monroe Brothers, the Delmore Brothers, the Blue Sky Boys, the Prairie Ramblers, and Bill Boyd;



Moon Mullican. Courtesy Doug Green.

similarly, the buff-and-green Bluebird label was as popular in many parts of Texas, only here the stars were Lidya Mendoza and Narciso Martinez.

The sound was close harmony, twelve-string guitar, bass, and accordion, once again introduced by the German and Slavic settlers. And so close was the relation between Anglo and Norteño music at times that, for example, the Tune Wranglers, a country swing group of the 1930s, had several songs coreleased on Bluebird's



Mexican series as Tono Hombres, "Ye Old Rye Waltz" becoming "Centenos Vals" and "Rainbow" becoming "Arco Iris." Conversely, Mexican artists like El Ciego Melquiades (The Blind Fiddler) and Bruno Real had occasional records released in the standard U.S. series.

So the Tex-Mex music of late is really nothing new to native Texans, and while the coming of Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender may seem to many country fans as the opening of new doors and the breaking of old taboos, it is old hat to the creators of Texas' music, who assimilated long ago this Norteño music as well as mariachi, German, Appalachian, Slavic, the blues, and many other strains to form the many thriving, energetic forms of the music of the Lone Star State.

Yet another field to which Texas has contributed significantly has been gospel music, especially in the persons of the Chuck Wagon Gang, consisting of D. P. (Dad) Carter and three of his children, Rose, Anna, and Ernest, whose odd combination of cowboy (or at least frontier) image and gospel material made them popular for decades. They were first formed in Lubbock around 1933, but made their greatest impact in the Fort Worth area. In fact, their radio show—sponsored by Bewley Mills—went on the air over WBAP just before the Light Crust Doughboys' program, sponsored by Burrus Mill. Although their first recording sessions consisted of both secular and sacred material, they soon switched to an all gospel format, for which they became best known.

A trio called the Herrington Sisters (Winnie, Ida Nell, and Olga) had a similar approach, doing about half gospel and half country, folk, or sentimental material. Based in Wichita Falls, they boomed out over the entire central United States on that strange chapter in the history of Texas and of commercial radio, the Mexican border stations.

One of the most famous names in gospel music, the Stamps Quartet, originated in the Lone Star State as well. They became popular over KRLD in Dallas, and, interestingly, some of their early (about 1929) Columbia recordings featured guitar, although they soon settled into the piano/vocal quartet formation that was to become the hallmark of gospel quartets for years to come.

Yet all of these influences are but part of the story, for while they are important ingredients indeed, they are still added ingredients, spices for the two basics of Texas music: the songs of the singing cowboy and the music of the square-dance fiddle band, which not only formed the foundation for the music of the Lone Star State, but that are still dominant today.

Cowboy music and song began as early as the first settlers in the Alamo days of the 1830s, although the occupational songs of cowboy life with which we are familiar today did not really come into being until after the Civil War, when the West began to develop rapidly. What the settlers brought with them were the popular songs of the East and the folk songs and tunes of their particular ethnic culture, particularly England and Ire-



*The Herrington Sisters.* Courtesy Bob Pinson.

land, from where, in fact, many of the original cowboys had emigrated.

The lonely, if romantic, image of the cowhand and his guitar crooning his cattle to sleep is largely a figment of the imagination of writers of Western novels, films, and songs. In actuality, the guitar was a relative latecomer to the West, and it was certainly an impractical instrument to carry around on horseback—too large and too fragile. The cowboy did indeed sing, both to his cattle and to occupy his time, but except in rare instances the songs were, much like his work, monotonous and dreary, his voice rough (a turn-of-the-century writer said, no doubt with accuracy, “whatever voice he had to begin with he lost bawling at cattle”), and his vo-

calizing unaccompanied by any instrument.

Well before the turn of the century it became the practice of newspapers in the West to publish the poems of would-be bards of the West (among whom were some genuine cowboys), and some of these verses caught on with the public. Usually put to an old tune, they were quickly assimilated into folk repertoire. It was here that the classic ballads of the West were born, these poems set to one of the handful of tunes that made up the bedrock of the cowboy repertoire. And many were to become classics: “Little Joe the Wrangler,” “Utah Carroll,” “The Zebra Dun,” “The Strawberry Roan,” and many others.

Although cowboy song was a thriving tradition in Texas, no authentic versions were actually recorded until 1925, when upon the mammoth success of "The Prisoner's Song," a Texan named Carl T. Sprague ventured to the Victor Company in New York to see if he just couldn't do as well trying his hand at this newish business of recording. His "When the Work's All Done This Fall" was to sell some nine hundred thousand records beginning with the following year, and from that point on cowboy songs were here to stay.

The 1920s saw a rash of cowboy songs sung by Texans: Dalhart himself, although hardly a cowboy singer, had a significant number of western songs in his repertoire, "The Dying Cowboy" and "Home on the Range" among many others. Others, like Sprague, stuck almost strictly to cowboy songs: Jules Verne Allen and the Cartwright Brothers, for example. And, in his early period, even Stuart Hamblen's first recording nickname was "Cowboy Joe." Hamblen was to become famous in the 1930s with songs like "Texas Plains" and "My Mary," and after his celebrated conversion at a Billy Graham crusade, for sacred and semisacred songs like "This Ol' House" and "It Is No Secret (What God Can Do)." So dramatic was the conversion, in fact, that the former hell-raiser ran for President on the Prohibition ticket in 1952.

The cowboy image proved a popular one on record, and even the Mississippi Blue Yodeler, Jimmie Rodgers, recorded several cowboy songs such as "When the Cactus Is in Bloom," "Cowhand's Last Ride," and "Yodel-

ing Cowboy," and had at least one publicity photo made of himself in full cowboy regalia—ten-gallon hat, chaps, and all. His glamorization of the cowboy and cowboy life certainly helped move cowboy music farther into the realm of mainstream country music, and his widely heralded move to Kerrville has increased his identification with the state of Texas throughout the years, despite his Deep South roots and raising.

Texas' cowboys moved right into the 1930s as well, as Tex Owens became a major country-music star with his version of "Cattle Call," and Cowboy Slim Rinehart became the king of the border stations, that peculiar, even bizarre, segment in radio's history. Yet by far the greatest glorification of Texas music and cowboy music came not via record but via film, and it was Texas singers who, for by far the largest part, were so influential in the creation and propagation of the popularity of that colorful bit of Americana known as filmdom's singing cowboy.

Easily the most authentic of these heroes of the silver screen was Woodward Maurice Ritter, who learned to love authentic cowboy songs and ballads from noted scholar J. Frank Dobie while attending the University of Texas in Austin. Ritter spent a year at Northwestern University Law School near Chicago before heading for New York for a career on the stage, where he appeared in some half-dozen stage productions (acquiring the nickname Tex in the process) starring in an extremely popular radio series called "Cowboy Tom's Roundup," and hosting a country-music barn

dance called the WHN “Barn Dance” before heading West to pursue a career in films.

Tex’s first recordings—for ARC (the American Record Company) in 1933—are probably as close to authentic cowboy performances as were ever commercially recorded: Sung with deliberate lack of sophistication (Ritter later proved himself to be a far better singer), with little attention paid to time or meter, and only a rudimentary guitar accompaniment, it is easy to see why these records (“Good-bye, Old Paint,” “A-riding Old Paint,” “Every Day in the Saddle,” and “Rye Whiskey”) didn’t sell. But they are a fascinating look into an authentic re-creation of a sound.

Ritter was to become one of America’s most popular film stars of the 1930s, and in the 1940s he decreased his recording of cowboy songs and recorded a barrage of hit country love songs: “There’s a New Moon Over My Shoulder,” “You Two-timed Me One Time Too Often,” and “Jealous Heart” among them.

Although his screen career pretty much ended in 1945, he maintained great visibility throughout the 1950s through his hosting of “Town Hall Party” in Los Angeles, his recording a set of children’s records of cowboy songs that seems nearly ubiquitous among those who grew up in that era, and for his Academy Award-winning rendition of the theme song of the 1953 film *High Noon*. A great lover of authentic cowboy and country music, Ritter was one of the guiding forces behind the Country Music Hall of Fame and was throughout his long career one of the most visible,

accessible, and knowledgeable proponents of Texas music the Lone Star State ever had.

But Ritter was not the first film singing cowboy by any means. He was preceded on the screen in that role as early as 1930 by Ken Maynard in *Song of the Saddle*. Maynard sang, fiddled, and strummed banjo and

*Tex Ritter. Courtesy Doug Green.*





*Ken Maynard.* Courtesy Doug Green.

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guitar in many of his films, providing musical interludes between the action sequences. Maynard even did a bit of recording in 1930, the old black Columbia label reading “Ken Maynard (The American Boy’s Favorite Cowboy).” However, his career on records was neither long nor particularly distinguished.

One of the many western harmony trios also had roots in Texas: Although long-time Autry backup band The Cass County Boys all met in Los An-

geles, they took their name from lead singer Fred Martin’s home county of Cass in, of course, Texas.

Although Maynard was technically the first cowboy to sing, the first singing cowboy brought into film specifically in that role—whose action sequences were, as opposed to Maynard’s, simply interludes between songs—was yet another Texan named Gene Autry. Born on a ranch near Tioga, Autry actually spent his teenage years in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, but

in both locations he became a good rider and developed his talents as a singer and entertainer as well. Although for quite some time he had no serious plans of a career in music, he had at least flirted with the idea: He ran away from home while still in high school to join the Fields Brothers Marvelous Medicine Show.

Autry foundered for a style for a time; rumor had it that he even auditioned with Al Jolson's "Sonny Boy" on his first round of record-company tryouts, and was told to go back to Oklahoma (where he was employed as a telegrapher) and practice his guitar and to try to learn some tunes like this hot new sensation named Jimmie Rodgers. Autry returned the following year (1929) apparently having taken this advice to heart: His early records for Grey Gull, Okeh, Gennett, and Victor are virtually indistinguishable from Rodgers. However, around 1930 Autry began to develop his own style and to exploit his authentic western background by surrounding himself with the trappings of cowboy regalia. He obtained a spot on WLS in Chicago as Oklahoma's Yodeling Cowboy, and there he had the first of his many megahits, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine." By 1933 he was firmly in the cowboy mold, and he introduced such songs as "The Last Roundup" (1933) and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" (1934) to country audiences via record, and they responded warmly (Chapter Five describes Autry's career in detail).

Meanwhile, in Hollywood, studio head Herbert J. Yates and producer Nat Levine had come up with the concept of a singing cowboy in a film

series, and the popular young singer with the cowboy image, the blond hair, and the flashing smile was chosen. It is said that while casting that they found actors who could sing but couldn't ride, and actors who could ride but couldn't sing, before settling on Autry, the singer who could ride but couldn't act.

If anything, however, his naïveté and ingenuousness before the camera made him somehow more appealing, and he was not just a hit, he was a sensation. The success of his first few films not only delineated a new country-music genre in and of itself, but also opened the floodgates for the horde of singing cowboys who poured in from all over the nation in the next decade: Ritter from Texas via New York, Ray Whitley from Alabama also by way of New York, Roy Rogers from Ohio, Bob Baker from Colorado, Eddie Dean from Texas by way of Chicago, Jimmy Wakely and Johnny Bond from Oklahoma, Monte Hale from Texas, bandleaders Bill Boyd and Art Davis from Texas, Rex Allen from Arizona by way of Chicago, and on and on.

Two place names keep cropping up here: Chicago and Texas, for the "National Barn Dance" and WLS were not only the training grounds for Autry, but for Dean and Allen as well; and Texas, in the vanguard of this movement to begin with, provided a host of musicians and actors for the industries of film and of record.

Eddie Dean had teamed with his brother Jimmie (no relation to fellow Texan Jimmy Dean of "Big Bad John" and pork sausage fame; these Dean Brothers were born with the

surname Glosup in Posey, Texas) and apprenticed on the “National Barn Dance” before heading West. Eddie appeared in many Tex Ritter films before starring in his own series for PRC in 1946–49, while Jimmie never got the breaks as an actor but was an essential part of several groups as a singer and musician, notable among them the popular band led by yet another Texan, Foy Willing and the Riders of the Purple Sage. Eddie achieved his greatest fame as a songwriter, however, not an actor, his “One Has My Name, the Other Has My Heart” and “Hillbilly Heaven” the best known among many.

Foy Willing’s Riders of the Purple Sage were similar (although far from identical) to a group whose close harmony singing defined the style for all western groups to come: the Sons of the Pioneers. Often associated with Texas, none of the cofounders were from anywhere near the state (Bob Nolan from Canada, Len Slye—later known as Roy Rogers—from Ohio, and Tim Spencer from Missouri), but two extremely important later members were indeed Texans, Hugh and Karl Farr, the fiddle-and-guitar brother team whose sound was integral to that of the Pioneers.

Bill Boyd and Art Davis approached Hollywood from a different angle but were nonetheless from the Lone Star State, Boyd the guitar playing leader of a band called his Cowboy Ramblers (best known for “Under the Double Eagle” and “Lone Star Rag”), while Davis, himself an ex-Cowboy Rambler, first joined Gene Autry as his fiddle player before going into films himself, and, in the early 1940s,

fronting his own western swing band, the Rhythm Riders.

On the other hand, a Texas singing cowboy who was mostly an actor was Monte Hale. Although he sang in many movies (he was hired as a backup to Roy Rogers, should Rogers defect from the studio or make difficult contract demands, much as Rogers had himself been hired during a disagreement between Republic Studios and Gene Autry) and recorded for MGM and other labels, he never really caught on with the record-buying country-music audience. Nevertheless, he enjoyed a brief heyday in films. Like many talented singing cowboys, he entered the field as its popularity was waning, and having had the possibility of being a major star had he been born a decade before, he simply is treated by most film histories as an also-ran. The genre had few years left when he, Rex Allen, and even Jimmy Wakely to an extent made their bids for screen stardom.

One of Texas’ most colorful singing cowboys was (and still is) Red River Dave McEnergy of San Antonio, who became a popular singer of cowboy songs in New York, recorded for Decca and Continental, and also appeared in Miami, Florida, and throughout Texas on various radio stations, basing for the most part in San Antonio. After a retirement of nearly two decades, McEnergy—now bedecked with gold boots and leonine silver hair and goatee—is making a comeback as one of Nashville’s most prominent characters.

McEnergy made a few movies, but his base in New York City introduced him via network radio to thousands of

listeners nationwide. And on a more local level, it introduced him to one of the most important figures in the history of country music, a sturdy, deep-chested fellow Texan named Vernon Dalhart. Although past his prime when he recorded McEney's composition, "Johnnie Darlin'," at his last recording session in 1939, Dalhart had been country music's first recording star, and the man who sang country music's first million seller.

Vernon Dalhart was born Marion Try Slaughter in Jefferson, Texas, and aspired at an operatic career, in furtherance of which he moved to New York around 1915. By 1916 he had already made his first recording, and was for several years to have quite a successful career on Broadway and in light opera. Among his specialties—especially on record—were the southern "darky" songs that were extremely popular for some time around and after the turn of the century. Dalhart's biggest hit had been, in fact, such a number: "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline?"

Dalhart apparently felt that country tunes could be as popular, especially given the success of Henry Whitter's "Wreck of the Southern Old 97" in early 1924, but few of the record companies with which he dealt (and there were many, for the practice of signing artists to exclusive contracts, taken for granted today, was rare in Dalhart's day, and he was free to record as much for any number of companies on per-record contracts) agreed with his judgment. Eventually he persuaded Edison to try it in May of 1924, and then recorded "The Wreck of the Old 97" again in Au-

gust for Victor, backed with a tune he and his cousin composed, "The Prisoner's Song." The accompaniment was pure country—guitar, harmonica, and voice—and what happened is the stuff from which legend is made: "The Prisoner's Song" took off like no record before and few since, and estimates on its total sales on the multitude of labels on which Dalhart recorded it run from three million to nine million to twenty-seven million! And thus did Vernon Dalhart become country music's first recording star.

As mentioned, because Dalhart did not have a long-term recording contract with Victor, he recorded for nearly every label then in existence, ultimately using well over a hundred pseudonyms by the time his career was over in the late 1930s; some of them still have scholars guessing.

Dalhart was certainly country music's first star, and his 1916 recordings for Thomas Edison make Dalhart the first country singer to record, but these recordings were not country in sound, style, or intent. The honor of the first genuinely country recordings to be made go to—you guessed it—a fellow Texan, named Eck Robertson, in 1922.

Alexander Campbell Robertson, although actually born in Arkansas, moved to Texas at the age of three and became one of the Lone Star State's champion fiddlers, the winner of numerous contests, and a figure of great local popularity. It was he who took the train to New York, having teamed up at a Confederate Veterans Reunion in Richmond, Virginia, with 74-year-old Henry Gilliland, marched into the Victor Records offices in a



full Confederate Army uniform (although he was in fact born over two decades after the end of the Civil War), and demanded to make a record. That they did, and their June 30–July 1, 1922, sessions mark the first in country music's history, consisting of six tried and true fiddle tunes. From here sprung the long fiddle-band recording tradition in Texas music, captured on wax as it had been practiced live for years.

Robertson, in addition to his fearsome reputation in fiddling contests, was active as well in the old frontier tradition of playing house parties—that is, Saturday night gatherings at one home or another at which the rugs were rolled back and dancing lasted well into the morning. The development of dancing at house parties to dancing at nightclubs parallels remarkably the growth of western swing.

A crusty old contemporary of Robertson's was M. J. Bonner, an authentic Civil War veteran (could this be where Robertson got the inspiration for his costume?) who recorded but one session for Victor in March of 1925 as Captain M. J. Bonner (The Texas Fiddler). Like Robertson's, his repertoire was basically composed of southeastern hoedowns. Bonner's little niche in history is well deserved, however, because it was he who hosted the initial broadcast of the WBAP "Barn Dance," the first such program in the nation, on January 4, 1923. Backed by, of all the unlikely groups, Fred Wagner's Hilo Five Orchestra, Captain Bonner played a rousing hour and a half of old-timey fiddling, interspersed with Hawaiian music, and

listener response was so great that the nation's first radio barn dance became a fixture at WBAP for several years thereafter.

Other bands in the early days of recording reflect this hoary Texas fiddle-band tradition as well: Solomon and Hughes, and Steeley and Graham, both from the Dallas-Fort Worth area, made pioneer recordings in the late 1920s, and both duos were exclusively string band in sound. Ervin Solomon on fiddle and Joe Hughes on second fiddle were later joined by a guitar-playing younger brother, Jim Solomon; their only recording consisted of two old string-band classics, "Ragtime Annie" and "Sally Johnson." They continued to play house parties with an increasingly larger band (which even included a steel guitar) well into the mid-1930s. A. L. Steeley and J. W. Graham relied very much on the same kind of material (they too recorded "Ragtime Annie" on Brunswick at the same time Solomon and Hughes were recording theirs for Victor), but were extremely atypical of Texas tradition in that Graham played the five-string banjo. Clearly, at this point at least, the fiddle-band traditions of the Southeast and the Southwest were not far different at all. The division of styles was yet to come.

Another example of this same tradition was the short-lived Prince Albert Hunt, who was one of the first to bridge the gap between breakdown fiddle and what was to become western swing. A fiddler in the old-time tradition, he was also a showman, and not only enlarged his band, but also went from playing house parties to



Prince Albert Hunt. (The owner of the phantom hand on Hunt's shoulder is lost in history). Courtesy Bob Pinson.

playing for dances in dance halls and the small bars that became known as honky-tonks.

His association with blacks and with blues was an interesting and revealing part of his music and his life. Hunt lived "across the tracks" in the black section of Terrell, Texas; he was frequently found on the front porch of his shanty jamming with black musicians, and he recorded several rather strange blues, such as "Blues in a Bottle," with a rough, bluesy fiddle style. His close association with black musicians is more than reminiscent of Bob Wills' famous learning experiences in the cotton fields with black coworkers in his youth.

At any rate, Prince Albert Hunt's move from house parties to dance halls was both historic and symbolic, and was, in Hunt's particular case, the cause of his youthful and bizarre demise in March of 1931. While stroll-

ing out of a Dallas dance hall at the conclusion of one of his dances, his fiddle under one arm and a good-looking, overly affectionate lady on the other, he was shot to death in his tracks by the jealous husband of his companion. Dallas was still a frontier town in many ways.

A couple long associated with Hunt were the uncle-and-nephew team of Oscar and Doc Harper, who recorded for Okeh the same day as Hunt and apparently backed him on his session. Oscar, a better fiddler than Hunt, stayed around long enough to make several recordings for the Library of Congress on John Lomax's celebrated field trip of 1942.

The band that bridged the gap between old-time mountain string-band music and western swing more than any other was an outfit called the East Texas Serenaders. Both the size and the musical scope of the group presaged the development of the western swing that grew out of the Texas swing band. They were led by a left-handed fiddler named D. H. Williams, whose parents, like so many Texans, had migrated from Tennessee, and his repertoire was full of mountain square-dance tunes like "Sally Goodin" and "Old Joe Clark." In the late 1920s he teamed up with guitarist Claude Hammonds, tenor banjo player John Munnerlin, and a fellow named Henry Bogan, who played a three-string cello like a string bass, and they called this motley aggregation the East Texas Serenaders.

Their recording career (for Brunswick, Columbia, and Decca) lasted from 1927 to 1934, and probably could have gone on further, but they

were never full-time musicians and did not care to travel. In addition, they grew up playing at house parties, and were quite uncomfortable in the honky-tonk/ballroom atmosphere in which dances increasingly took place as the 1930s progressed. However, their four-piece group and their selection of "rag" material ("Mineola Rag," "Combination Rag") were definite steps away from the standard fiddle-band tradition, and steps toward the swing-string music to come. In addition, in later years Williams was to tutor one of the great jazz/swing fiddlers of all time: ex-Texas Playboy and current cream of Nashville's crop of session musicians, Johnny Gimble.

The repertoire of the East Texas Serenaders eloquently demonstrates the shift many fiddle bands were making toward swing, largely because of the awesome influences of both radio and record. Williams recalls that in between the square-dance tunes and the jazzier rags, they frequently sang hits of the day, learned from radio or record, such as "Five Foot, Two" in the early days, and "Rosetta" and "Stardust" later on. The fiddle music of the western frontier, not far different from that of the Southeast for many years, was suddenly exposed to a wide variety of other influences over the airwaves: nearby Cajun and Norteño music, the more distant strains of New Orleans and Chicago jazz, and the increasingly swinging sounds of mainstream popular music. Creative and adaptable musicians were quick to make elements of all these styles their own, and thus was born Texas music's most distinctive offspring: western swing.

It all got under way with a group called the Light Crust Doughboys, who were not all that different from the East Texas Serenaders. Not that this was a swing band—it really wasn't at all—but it was heading that way, and among its graduates are all the early greats of the genre: Milton Brown, Johnnie Lee Wills, Tommy Duncan, Leon McAuliffe, Herman Arnspiger, and, of course, Bob Wills.

The Doughboys were led—maybe directed is more like it—by an ambitious flour executive for Burrus Mill named Wilbert Lee O'Daniel, who although not a musician served as their announcer, boss, agent, and even wrote some of their more memorable songs as well, "Beautiful Texas" and "Put Me in Your Pocket" among them. He heard a group called Aladdin's Laddies on the radio one day, and decided this might just be one heck of a way to sell flour, so he took this band—composed of Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and Herman Arnspiger—and renamed them the Light Crust Doughboys (the name was decided their first time on the air in Fort Worth) after the brand of flour he wanted to promote.

W. Lee O'Daniel was inspired by the tremendous popularity of the Doughboys (a band that, in various permutations, has lasted to the present) to propel his career as a politician, with a similar band of the same sort, the Hillbilly Boys. O'Daniel eventually rose to governor of the state of Texas, and later United States senator, but he was an autocratic and high-handed bandleader, and there was considerable disaffection within the Doughboys band.



*The Light Crust Doughboys.* Courtesy Bob Pinson.

The first to break away was vocalist Milton Brown; his high-pitched, sweet, pop-tinged vocals sparked the band's sound, and he went on to form the first "real" western swing band, which he called his Musical Brownies. Building on what he'd learned as a Doughboy, he and his innovative musicians (primarily Cecil Brower, Cliff Bruner, Papa Calhoun, Wanna Coffman, Ocie Stockard, brother Durwood Brown, and legendary pioneer steel guitarist Bob Dunn) combined the musical styles of their region with the swing and pop styles of the day to become one of the most exciting and influential bands of the era. Milton Brown's influence was every bit as great as was Bob Wills' in his era, but the promise of a legendary career was cut short by a fatal 1936 auto-

mobile accident, and all that remains are some great recordings on Decca and Bluebird, which only hint at the greatness possible.

When Milton Brown left the Light Crust Doughboys, he was replaced by a deeper-voiced singer with a real feel for the blues named Tommy Duncan, and although his sound was rather different, it was just as popular. Still, fiddler and more or less *de facto* leader Bob Wills chafed at the bit, and in the late summer of 1933 he finally left the Doughboys, taking with him his banjo-playing brother Johnnie Lee and vocalist Tommy Duncan. Adding the Whalin brothers, Kermit and June, this fledgling swing band moved to Waco, where they called themselves Bob Wills and his Playboys—the "Texas" was added to the band



*Milton Brown (at microphone) and his Musical Brownies. Courtesy Bob Pinson.*

name only after they moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, the following year.

Although always firmly associated with the Lone-Star State, Wills and his Texas Playboys found their greatest success—artistically and financially—during the nine years they headquartered at KVOO in Tulsa. Subsequent moves to California and Texas were never able to rekindle the greatness of that era.

The hot dance music Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, provided from their very first recording session, caused them to become a local sensation, then a regional one, and eventually a national one, with the 1941 million seller “New San Antonio Rose.” Propelled by a swing beat, the band never lost its country feel, with Bob’s exuberant hollering a trademark

both on record and in person, and with the ever-present steel guitar of Leon McAuliffe as well. It was a music that somehow outlived its usefulness in the 1950s but that is coming back stronger than ever today.

Still, at about the time the Light Crust Doughboys were still going strong, and Bob Wills was beginning to become a star in Tulsa, and Milton Brown was meeting his untimely death, a host of other swing bands began to crop up all over the state of Texas. It would be easy to brand them as imitators—most were indeed inspired by both the sound and the success of Brown and Wills—but on the other hand, most were exactly like the Brown and Wills outfits: Texas fiddle bands experimenting with the new sounds they heard over the radio

and on record, and striving to adapt those strains to their own music. Although none approached the popularity of Wills, a host of such Texas swing bands made their indelible mark on the music of the Lone Star State.

A band that maintained a western swing feel but never went to brass instruments was Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers. While its mainstays over the years were Bill and his brother Jim, the Cowboy Ramblers had a host of illustrious sidemen pass through their ranks, including Jesse Ashlock and Art Davis. Davis had the unusual distinction of cutting Boyd's first hit, "Under the Double Eagle," in 1935,

and his last, "Lone Star Rag," in 1950, although he spent the intervening years touring with Autry, appearing in films on his own, and leading his own western swing band as well.

Extremely close to the traditional fiddle-band sound, Boyd nevertheless adopted the fancy Hollywood cowboy image (he in fact made several films in the late 1930s, and has ever since been confused with William Boyd—Hopalong Cassidy) and sported a host of swiny songs. Still his staples were the fiddle tunes and waltzes that have characterized Texas music from the beginning.

There were other groups: for example, the Hi-Flyers, a Fort Worth

*Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. Courtesy Country Music Foundation.*



group whose leader, banjoist Elmer Scarborough, claims predates the Light Crust Doughboys. Their progress, too, parallels that of many other pioneer swing bands in that it started small, then grew larger and electrified instruments along the way, their repertoire going from fiddle tunes and reworked pop hits to an increasing number of original songs and tunes as time went

on. Perhaps the band's interesting accomplishment was the pairing of Lefty Perkins and the legendary Bob Dunn on twin steel guitars on border station XEPN, a sound that unfortunately was never preserved on record.

An interesting and peculiar band of the period was the Tune Wranglers of San Antonio. Despite two full-fledged hit records (for Bluebird) of the era—"Texas Sand" in 1937 and the novelty "Hawaiian Honeymoon" in 1939—little was heard of them thereafter. They apparently disbanded in 1940 and never reformed. Led by Buster Coward, they claimed to be authentic ranch hands, and their sound was a mixture of string band, swing, and heavy doses of cowboy, although they played down the string-band aspect perhaps more than most, while on the other hand featuring more original material than the majority of their contemporaries. As far as best-selling records go, their moment in the sun was impressive, but it was at the same time surprisingly brief.

A band that delved more deeply into jazz than most was Roy Newman and his Boys, who worked mainly out of Dallas. Recording as early as 1934, their specialities were numbers like "Tin Roof Blues," "Sadie Green, the Vamp of New Orleans," and "Tiger Rag," which shows, if nothing else, the widespread influence of jazz material (spread rapidly by radio and record) on Texas bands. Since Bill Boyd and his Cowboy Ramblers were also playing at WRR in Dallas at the same time, they freely exchanged and shared band members, Art Davis among them. One of Roy Newman's Boys who went on to glory on his own was

*Bill Boyd. Courtesy Bob Pinson.*



vocalist Gene Sullivan, later to join with Wiley Walker in Oklahoma to become an extremely popular singing and song-writing (“Live and Let Live,” “When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold”) duet of the late 1930s.

A couple of other bands made contributions to (or at least were reflections of) elements of the burgeoning Texas swing sound, but relatively little is really known about them. The Nite Owls, led by Jack True, were extremely typical of these bands, going from fiddle tunes to blues, rehashed pop, jazz, and even Mexican (“Cielito Lindo,” “Rancho Grande”) and some original material, none of it unusual enough to make them household words. Their apparent home base of Austin was a bit out of the ordinary, but predates the music scene there by some forty years. Rather the opposite approach came from a West-Texas group formed by Bob Kendrick, but dubbed Bob Skyles’ Skyrockets by record producer Eli Oberstein, which was both the brassiest and the corniest of all country swing bands. Working out of Pecos, their sound was sort of a brass version of the Hoosier Hot Shots, and novelty numbers like “Arkansas Bazoooka Swing” and “Bazoooka Stomp” were their stock in trade.

The far-flung location of the Nite Owls and Bob Skyles’ Skyrockets docs, however, point out one interesting aspect of Texas swing. While the bulk of the action took place in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, it was a genuinely widespread phenomenon throughout the Lone Star State. Many other swing bands had far-flung locations: Adolph Hofner and the ‘Tune Wranglers in San Antonio, Doug Bine (as well as

Bob Wills in his early years) in Waco, Cliff Bruner in Beaumont, Ted Daffan in Houston, and more and more as the 1930s ended and the 1940s progressed.

Another very interesting minor swing band was the Crystal Springs Ramblers, not so much for their own good but unexceptional music as for the band members who came out of the troupe. Link Davis (“Big Mamou”), Bob Wills’ longtime left-handed fiddler Joe Holley, and fiddler Leon Selph all were alumni of the outfit, named after the Crystal Springs dance pavilion northwest of Fort Worth, where they were the staff band for years under the direction of Papa Sam Cunningham. Although they had only two recording sessions (both in June of 1937), they were an extremely popular band in person for years.

Although fiddler Leon Selph did not record with the Crystal Springs Ramblers, he was an important member, and he left the band to form an extremely influential group called the Blue Ridge Playboys—a rather odd name for a swing band—in 1935. Two original members later went on to develop the offshoot of western swing known as honky-tonk in the following decade: lead singer and guitarist Floyd Tillman and steel guitarist Ted Daffan. Both were to write songs that sold into the many millions in years to come, and a couple of them (Tillman’s “Slippin’ Around” and Daffan’s “Born to Lose”) were to become country-music landmarks in addition to racking up big sales.

The importance of the Blue Ridge Playboys is further underscored by three other members who went on into a honky-tonk rather than in a



swing vein: their pianist Moon Mullican, a sometimes vocalist and guitarist named Chuck Keeshan (who was to spend some years with Ted Daffan), and guitarist Dickie McBride, a long-time fixture of the Houston area well into the television age. If the seeds of honky-tonk as a musical style can be said to have been sown somewhere, then it surely must have been with the Blue Ridge Playboys in the 1930s. It was a style created not so much by men as by economics; it was a music for jukeboxes and small bands in roadside dance taverns. With the exception of Ernest Tubb and Al Dexter, every major early figure in the style came out of but one band, the Blue Ridge Playboys.

Still, while this style known as honky-tonk was being birthed from western swing the mother and the rise of the jukebox and the tavern the father, there was still considerable activity in the field of swing, activity that was to span three decades, activity, that despite a period of dormancy, is very much a part of Texas music today.

Another swing band that bridged the gap between the swing and the honky-tonk styles was Cliff Bruner's 'Texas Wanderers, which has among its many accomplishments the honor of recording and releasing country music's first truck-driving song, a Ted Daffan composition called "Truck Driver's Blues," in 1939. Bruner began his career as a fiddler with Milton Brown's Musical Brownies, participating in Brown's last recording session, and he is still an active performer to this day. Although based in Beaumont, the Texas Wanderers seemed

to borrow band members (Tillman, Mullican, McBride) freely from the Blue Ridge Playboys, which may well explain their propensity toward honky-tonk.

Western swing reached an awkward point in the era after World War II: While for some bands, like Wills and Spade Cooley, it was a financially extremely successful time in their career, on the other hand, a good bit of the music at the grass-roots level was dying on the vine. It was a symptom that accurately paralleled the national disaffection with the smooth, dreamy, danceable big-band sound and its concurrent turn to the lonely honky-tonk sound, to songs like "Slippin' Around," and, ultimately, to the simple, direct, southeastern sounds of Hank Williams and Kitty Wells. It was a rough period for Texas in general, and western swing specifically, one from which this particular genre of Texas music was not to recover until the early 1970s.

That swing was fading in Texas after the war is dramatically demonstrable: Most swing bands disbanded during the war, and few reorganized after V-J Day. Those that did (with the exception of Hofner) were unable to get major label affiliation any longer. The exceptions, Wills and Cooley (who was actually from Oklahoma, not Texas), were enjoying considerable success, but not in Texas; both were based in California, and after about 1950 even their big record-selling days were over as well. Bob's younger brother Johnnie Lee Wills also enjoyed considerable success in postwar Tulsa, but despite two hit records—"Rag Mop" and "Peter Cottontail"—

his success was regional. Tastes and fashions inevitably changed, and western swing went quickly out of favor, not to return for two decades.

Still, some new faces appeared in the 1940s, although they had to be extreme diehards or extremely adaptable to survive. An example of the former was an unabashed Bob Wills imitator and admirer named Hoyle Nix, who has led his West Texas Cowboys in Big Spring ever since the late 1940s, faithfully preserving the Bob Wills sound. He was rewarded by a guest appearance on Wills' 1974 album *For the Last Time*. Similarly, a group called the Miller Brothers (real name: Gibbs; Sam Gibbs was later to become Bob Wills' manager) struggled along

in Wichita Falls with a devoted local following, their sound good, traditional western swing.

The other approach was taken by Waco's Hank Thompson, who returned from the Navy to build an extremely successful career with a swing band. He was able to get away with it in the 1950s (while Wills struggled and most of the rest gave up) by a combination of a music much smoother than any of the other swing bands had been able to get, with the occasional exception of Cooley, and also by the use of contemporary material, much of it self-written. It is noteworthy, however, that he achieved his greatest success in Oklahoma, where in fact he still lives. He kept a big band

Hank Thompson (left) and the Brazos Valley Boys (in dark jackets).



until rather recently, and the smooth sound of the Brazos Valley Boys led to their being named the top western swing band for thirteen straight years.

So while Wills endured (his bands dwindling in size until, in the late 1960s, just he and a vocalist were appearing), Hoyle Nix dug in and holed up in a pocket of loyalty, and Hank Thompson adapted swing to meet the demands of the day, an approach also followed with less success by Leon McAuliffe, who had founded his Cimarron Boys after the war. McAuliffe went so far as to record "Sh-boom" in smooth western swing style. Even Ray

Price had a fling with western swing, starting out with a small Hank Williams-type band (he in fact used the Drifting Cowboys for a couple of years after Hank's death), then going on to form a big, beautiful swing band in the mid-1950s before settling down to the smaller honky-tonk shuffle band with which he achieved his greatest success.

But for all this, western swing was for most purposes dead by the late 1950s, kayoed by the triple punches of the negative impact of television, the southeastern sound revival of the early 1950s, and the explosion of rock in mid-decade. Still, tastes and fads vary

*Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen.*



and shift, and music has always been prone to cyclical swings of popularity. What was once discarded is now discovered to be precious, and so western swing has risen once again, riding the pendulum back into popularity. Reunions of the Texas Playboys are big events, and a revamped group of ex-Playboys has been signed to do new recordings for Capitol Records. But time has taken its toll, for during the period of the surging revival of western swing former Playboys Jesse Ashlock, Noel Boggs, Keith Coleman, Sleepy Johnson, and the grand old man himself, Bob Wills, died as the music they created was being reborn.

Much of the impetus for this rebirth came from country-rock bands like Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen, and a group of Austinites (via San Francisco and their native Pennsylvania/West Virginia area) called Asleep at the Wheel, who delved deeply into the Bob Wills sound; they helped introduce this sound to a whole new and enthusiastic generation. An adopted Texan (actually born in Oklahoma) in this same tradition is Alvin Crow, the fiddling leader of his Pleasant Valley Boys, who pursues a half-original, half-revivalist approach to western swing.

At any rate, western swing is back with a vengeance, bigger now than ever before. Of all the Lone Star State's varied musical products, it may very well be the most important.

As has been seen, the history of western swing is closely entwined with that of honky-tonk. The basic thrust of both musical styles is the same—danceability—but as time went on they both took on quite distinct and

unique characteristics. For one thing, honky-tonk was usually performed by a small band, with electric guitar and steel lead (to cut through the din of crowded roadside taverns), while the trend in swing was, of course, to bigger bands, full rhythm sections, and often horn sections as well. Thematically the songs differed as well: Western swing songs were for the large part beautiful, danceable melodies, with dreamy, unspecific lyrics generalizing on the subject of love lost or found. Honky-tonk, however, was directed at the patrons of these roadside taverns and the realities of their lives, and as the years went by they became increasingly honest, even harsh, in dealing with the problems that beset honky-tonkers directly: excessive drinking, slipping around, frustration in life and in love. It is a style that has never died: For every Ray Price who changes stylistic horses in midstream there is a Johnny Bush or a Moe Bandy to take up the honky-tonk banner. The music appeals to something in a rather large percentage of country music's populace.

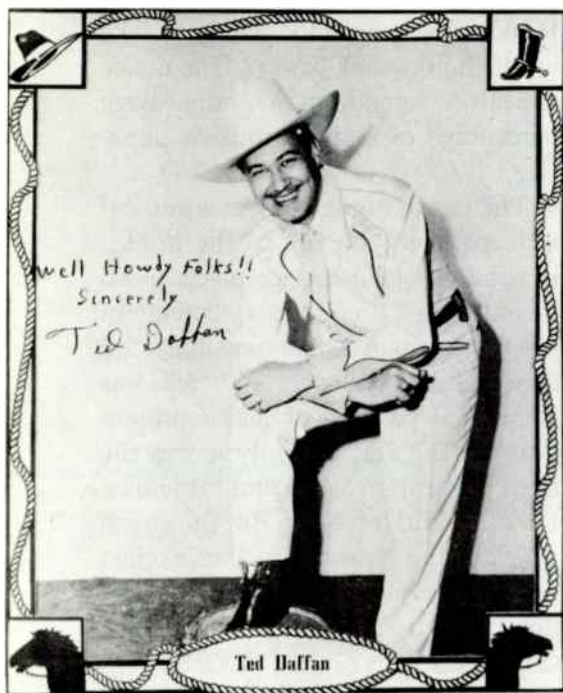
The rise of honky-tonk as a musical style parallels the rise of the honky-tonk as a social gathering place. With the advent of the jukebox, dancing in small taverns became possible, and dancing, it must be remembered, was a national pastime of major proportions in the era; certainly it was the basis for western swing and for honky-tonk first and foremost. But the crowd who did the two-step to the jukebox or the three-piece band was a different one from those who paid to dance at Cain's Academy or the Crystal Springs Pavilion. Hard drinkin' and easy lovin'

increasingly became the themes of honky-tonk songs.

As noted before, most of the early honky-tonk greats came out of the Blue Ridge Playboys: Ted Daffan, Floyd Tillman, and Moon Mullican. And that this is one of the purest forms of Texas music is self-evident. All were Texans by adoption if not by birth, as, indeed, were the two honky-tonk greats who were not ex-Blue Ridge Playboys, Ernest Tubb and Al Dexter.

Daffan came out of Houston (although actually born in Louisiana), a Hawaiian guitar player who joined the Blue Ridge Playboys on country steel. Even if he didn't start with country he had what it took, and he was to write more than one country-music classic:

*Ted Daffan. Courtesy Bob Pinson.*



His first session with his own band contained the jukebox instrumental favorite "Blue Steel Blues" as well as the perennial "Worried Mind."

Daffan went in for big bands, usually recording with six to eight musicians, sometimes as many as twelve; in fact, *Billboard* reported in the late 1940s that he was planning to build a twenty-two-piece orchestra on the West Coast, but there is no evidence that his plans ever materialized. However, even with large bands Daffan's approach was far more honky-tonk than swing. The band rarely swung, but instead concentrated on the lyrics of his songs, many of them—"Heading Down the Wrong Highway" the classic in this case—speaking directly to the honky-tonk patron.

Ted Daffan's Texans reached their peak at their February 1942 session for Okeh Records: Here the extremely popular "No Letter Today" was cut, as was the anthem of country music's dispossessed, "Born to Lose." It was a song that on its face dealt with hard luck and lost love but that took on a pervasive meaning to those who floundered and struggled in the perplexing war years, thrust into a faster-paced world for which they were ill prepared.

Daffan's career, like that of most big-band leaders, slid sharply after the war. After a fling in California he returned to Houston, where he lives today. His song-writing powers stayed strong, however: "I've Got Five Dollars and It's Saturday Night," "Tangled Mind," and "I'm a Fool to Care" became postwar hits for Faron Young, Hank Snow, and Les Paul and Mary Ford, respectively.

Daffan's old bandmate with the

Blue Ridge Playboys, Floyd Tillman, also distinguished himself largely as a songwriter, although he was a singer of great popularity, his strange, looping voice one of the most distinctive in country music. Although actually born in Oklahoma, he moved to Post, Texas, as a child, and has ever since been closely associated with Texas music. Today, where with bushy white sideburns he is a popular denizen of Austin, he is known affectionately as the original cosmic cowboy.

“I Love You So Much It Hurts Me,” “Each Night at Nine,” and “It Makes No Difference Now” are Tillman’s best-known compositions, along with another of country music’s true landmark songs, “Slippin’ Around.” One of the first songs to face the issue of infidelity head on, without apology or moralizing, it was daring in its day and has proved to be a landmark in country music’s history, although the way had been paved by Eddie Dean’s “One Has My Name, the Other Has My Heart.” Jimmy Wakely and Margaret Whiting’s version of “Slippin’ Around” was a quick million seller in 1949–50 and was symptomatic of the postwar mood, speaking to millions not only in honky-tonks but outside them as well.

Aubrey “Moon” Mullican was at once both more and less honky-tonk than his two fellow Blue Ridge Playboys. His bluesy, bawdy-house piano style was in and of itself closely entwined with the honky-tonk sound, and because of it his association with honky-tonk was natural and inevitable. On the other hand, he was a performer who was a master of a great many styles—blues, Cajun, straight



Floyd Tillman. Courtesy Doug Green.

country, pop, honky-tonk, Dixieland, ragtime, and many more—who, like Daffan and Tillman (although to a lesser degree), was well known for his song-writing as well, “Pipeliners’ Blues” and “Cherokee Boogie” among them. Still, this East Texan’s greatest contribution was his dynamic, exciting piano style, which has had a profound effect on Jerry Lee Lewis and many other rockabillys, who forged from Moon’s style their own hybrid creation.

It should, however, be pointed out that the roots of honky-tonk are not solely with the Blue Ridge Playboys among early Texas musicians. For example, the Shelton Brothers were an extremely popular and influential pre-honky-tonk band, recording as early as 1933 with Leon Chappelle as the Lone Star Cowboys. They grew to string-band proportions, then whole-



*Al Dexter.* Courtesy Bob Pinson.

heartedly adopted the honky-tonk sound in the late 1930s, with songs like “Rompin’ and Stompin’ Around.” Their two most popular songs—“Deep Elem Blues” and the ubiquitous “Just Because”—helped pave the way for the honky-tonk sound.

But the two real kings of honky tonk, as the form became more and more popular in the 1940s, were Jacksonville’s Al Dexter and Crisp’s Ernest Tubb, who brought the sound to the Southeast when he joined the “Opry” in 1943.

Al Dexter (born Albert Poindexter) began recording in 1936, and late in that decade began what turned out to be an extremely successful flirtation with the honky-tonk style. Al Dexter

and his Troopers were basically a small honky-tonk band, and the term “Honky Tonk” shows up early in his work: “Honky Tonk Blues” in 1936 (which may well be the first use of the term in a song title), “Honky Tonk Baby” in 1937, and “When We Go A-Honky Tonkin’” and “Poor Little Honky Tonk Girl” in 1940. He wrote and recorded the wartime smash “Pistol Packin’ Mama,” a humorous and unabashed description of the perils of honky-tonk life. Dexter was capable of writing other fine country material (“Guitar Polka,” “Rosalita,” “Too Late to Worry, Too Blue to Cry”), but his brief but glorious moment in the sun revolved around the honky-tonk sound that had made him famous and that he, in turn, helped popularize on a national level to a far greater degree than ever before.

Less explosively popular but with a career of far greater durability was Ernest Tubb, who began as a Jimmie Rodgers imitator on Bluebird records (he still owns Rodgers’ rare old Martin 000-45 guitar, given to him by Jimmie’s widow, Carrie). Tubb later developed his own very distinctive style, becoming well known in Texas while being sponsored by—you guessed it—a flour company, as the Gold Chain Troubador. He began recording for Decca in 1940, and had his first big hit with “Walking the Floor Over You” in 1943, which brought him to the “Opry.” His sound has always (with the exception of his very early Jimmie Rodgers period) been pure honky-tonk. Perhaps the “Opry” was groping for a successful, up-to-date sound when they hired him; at any rate, he was an immediate success, and



*Ernest Tubb and family.* Courtesy Country Music Foundation.

he helped spread the sound into the roadhouses and jukeboxes of the Southeast.

Tubb was not the first to bring an electric guitar onto the hallowed stage of the "Grand Ole Opry" (Sam McGee, Pee Wee King, and Paul Howard

all claim the honor), but he was the first to make it a major part of his sound, especially after Jimmie Short made that little four-note guitar lick an integral part of the Ernest Tubb sound. Often working with just the electric lead guitar, a steel, and a



bass, Tubb's approach was pure honky-tonk: straightforward, loud, direct, unsubtle, with the lyrics focusing on drinking, dancing, and the honky-tonk life. Apparently the man doesn't know the meaning of the word rest: Although he nominally lives in Nashville, he rarely sees the town, still touring over a hundred thousand miles a year of grueling one-nighters.

Ray Noble Price, of Perryville, fell right into this mold as well: Up until his celebrated image change in 1967, he had been known as the Cherokee Cowboy, and his band sound—with the exception of his all too brief fling with western swing—was hard-nosed Texas honky-tonk. In fact, more than

anyone he defined the honky-tonk sound of the 1950s: walking bass, heavy-handed drumming, and song after song in the two-step shuffle: "City Lights," "Crazy Arms," "Release Me," "My Shoes Keep Walking Back to You," "Heartaches by the Number," and many more. With Willie Nelson's bluesy composition "Night Life" in 1963, Ray Price at once got as deep into honky-tonk as anyone ever had, and yet hinted strongly at the mellow-voiced, resonant, country-pop Price of "For the Good Times" and beyond. It was a turning point for him, but he left behind him a host of imitators to fill the void (Johnny Bush the most conspic-

*Ray Price.* Courtesy Doug Green.



uous and easily the best), and the legacy of the greatest honky-tonk music of the 1950s.

Although his peak years came later (they are probably, in fact, occurring now), George Jones of Beaumont was also into the honky-tonk/Hank Williams mold pioneered by Price in the 1950s. In fact, while stationed in northern California while in the Marine Corps (about 1952) Jones appeared on a local basis. Frequently his repertoire exclusively consisted of Hank Williams' songs. Born in Saratoga, Texas, Jones first hit on the Starday label in 1955 with "Why, Baby, Why?" and had a long string of hard-core honky-tonk hits. But George Jones has always been extremely intimate with a song, and has drifted away from the raucous honky-tonk sound into something very personal and unique of his own. If anything, this explains the remarkable phenomenon of his growing popularity, even after a full two decades in country music.

Honky-tonk was a style that wouldn't die: The southeastern sound revival of the early 1950s helped knock off cowboy music and western swing, but it couldn't knock off honky-tonk, nor could the rock 'n' roll phenomenon later in the decade, nor could the ultraslick Nashville sound of the sixties. And through it all, true to form, it was Texas that carried the honky-tonk banner through good times and bad.

A pair who helped it weather the rock years were Charlie Walker, of Collin County, and Johnny Horton of Tyler. Walker went the time-honored route of disc jockey to singer, and scored biggest in 1958 with "Pick Me Up on Your Way Down." Horton, on



George Jones. Courtesy Country Music Foundation.

the other hand, gave up a promising career in music, having been a high-school singing star, to become a professional fisherman, but drifted back into performing on the West Coast. He returned to the area of his native East Texas\* in 1955, joining the cast

\* It is a peculiar historical quirk that nearly all the greats of Texas music are from the eastern part of the state, from Vernon Dalhart to Willie Nelson. It's hard to account for the unusual musical fertility of this area, other than the relatively sparse population of the more desolate middle and west of the state. The southeastern part of Texas has always had the seaports and good farmland (as well as oil later on) to support a large population. Then, too, in a musical sense, it was a location where the mixture of various cultures—hillbilly, black, Cajun, Mexican, German, and others—were able to mix and intermingle very freely.

of the "Louisiana Hayride" (Shreveport is just over the Texas/Louisiana border), and his career from that point on was spectacular but all too short: He was killed in an automobile accident on November 5, 1960.

Horton was firmly in the honky-tonk tradition—in fact, "I'm a Honky Tonk Man" was an early hit for him—but drifted into a semifolk/historical-song vein, of which he quickly became king with "Johnny Reb," "Springtime in Alaska," "North to Alaska," and the two superhits "Sink the *Bismarck*" and "The Battle of New Orleans."

It is a debatable point, of course, and purely a subjective one, but per-

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*Johnny Horton.* Courtesy Doug Green.



haps the greatest of them all was an ex-boxer and oil-field worker from Corsicana named William Orville Frizzell. From romping paeans to the honky-tonk life ("If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time") to gushy sentimentality ("Mom and Dad's Waltz") to straight country love songs ("I Love You a Thousand Ways"), Lefty had a spine-tingling sincerity to his voice, a voice capable of spectacular yet emotive vocal effects, a voice of tremendous warmth and intimacy, a voice that has had a remarkable effect on all who have followed. It was a sound so new (although instrumentally and thematically it was pure honky-tonk, through and through) that Lefty exploded with four songs in the country top ten at one time, a feat never since duplicated. But after the novelty wore off, Lefty couldn't seem to sustain this success, his personal life marred by bouts with the bottle, his records all too often wasting his magnificent voice on nondescript material, although when he found the right song later on ("Long Black Veil," "Saginaw, Michigan"), public response was there. It's a shame he didn't live up to his awesome potential, but even as it is, he ranks in the pantheon of the handful of all-time greats of Texas music.

Although Lefty died all too young (at forty-seven in 1975), the honky-tonk tradition lives on, with the likes of Billy Walker, one of the fine underrated singers of our time; Willie Nelson, a great writer and performer in the honky-tonk style before his outlaw days; and Moe Bandy, whose songs of low life, loose women, and

hard drinking are both a throwback to classic honky-tonk and a sure sign that it is as strong a musical form as ever.

Ernest Tubb's move to the "Opry" in 1943 signaled the beginning of another movement that was, in the 1950s, to accelerate rapidly. This was the migration of many Texas entertainers to Tennessee (reversing the steps of many of their ancestors)—more specifically to Nashville and the "Grand Ole Opry" (or at least to the Nashville sound). If there is a decade in which Texas' importance can be said to be minimal, it certainly must be that of the late 1950s to late 1960s. While the state never really fully dominated the entire spectrum of country music—although it made a heck of a run at it during the simultaneous height of western swing and singing cowboys—Texas always was, and currently is, a major force in the movement of the music. But this force was little felt in the rock/Nashville sound decade, blunted by these two extremely different but extremely powerful musical sounds.

Texas-in-Nashville describes this era as well as anything, for after Tubb came Price in 1950, then George Jones, Goldie Hill (one of the few women singers Texas has produced until very recent years),<sup>†</sup> and Billy Walker, who took that time-honored route of moving from the "Louisiana

<sup>†</sup> Others include singer-songwriter Cindy Walker, Texas Ruby (Tex Owens' sister) and Laura Lee McBride (Tex Owens' daughter and Dickie McBride's wife), who was Bob Wills' first girl singer. In the past decade Jeannie C. Riley, Barbara Mandrell, Billie Jo Spears, La Costa and Tanya Tucker, and Dottie Brodt have helped change that imbalance.



*Lefty Frizzell.* Courtesy Texas Hall of Fame.

Hayride" to the "Opry" after serving time in what might be called the high minors.

Easily the most important influence in the Texas-in-Nashville movement was Jim Reeves, who despite many years in the Lone Star State (he was born in the same county as Tex Ritter) came out of it without a touch of Texas in his smooth, romantic, appealing voice. An ex-disc jockey and aspiring baseball player, Reeves turned his attention to singing while working on the "Louisiana Hayride" as an announcer, and with the success of "Mexican Joe" and "Bimbo" moved to the "Opry" and to a full-time career as a singer.

But if there was any performer ready to shuck the good-ole-country-boy image it was Reeves, who was quite



*Jim Reeves.* Courtesy Doug Green.

eager to go along with the emerging Nashville music, the slick “country-politan” sound that developed when rock all but killed the hard southeastern sound of the early 1950s. Although Reeves never lost his country image to many country fans—including the South Africans and English who revere him today as much as ever—he clearly made a conscious effort at invading the country-pop territory mined so successfully by Eddy Arnold, who pretty much had the field to himself. Unafraid to tackle smooth, popular material, Reeves and the burgeoning Nashville sound helped pull the

town and the music through the lean rock years.

The Texas-in-Nashville phase continued in the early and mid-1960s‡ with the arrival of Willie and Waylon, but by then the character of the movement was beginning to change, and the seeds for the upcoming Texas revival were being sown. But in the meantime there was precious little to say for Texas, for the late 1950s and

‡ It’s a trend that continues: One of the “Opry’s” newest members, Larry Gatlin, is a native of the West Texas town of Seminole. Likewise, Don Williams hails from the Plainview, Texas, vicinity.

early 1960s saw—other than Reeves, whose sound was not remotely a reflection of Texas, and already established stars like Tubb and Price—few landmark performers or sounds emanate from the Lone Star State. One exception was Plainview's Jimmy Dean (born Seth Ward), who began recording as early as 1953, with "Bumming Around" on 4-Star. Solidly in the Texas-Nashville mold, Dean actually didn't move to Music City, but instead was based out of the Washington, D.C., area for his local television show, and New York for his CBS daytime network television show, and his ABC network show in the evening in the early 1960s.

Country music seemed to take a dramatic shift toward the southeastern sound in the 1950s. It had begun in the late 1940s with Hank Williams, and continued with Kitty Wells and Webb Pierce, and Ray Price and Hank Thompson, two Texans who tried to fuse the styles of the Southeast and the Southwest. Gone was interest in the jazzy complexity of western swing and the dreamy romanticism of the singing cowboys, and here was hard, harsh, direct, simple, gut-bucket hillbilly. The southeastern-sound revival lasted only a few years, and country music's shift to the Southeast rebounded westward after a few years, settling instead in the Memphis-northern-Mississippi-Arkansas area, with the powerful phenomenon known as rockabilly, a fusion of the hillbilly soul of the southeastern-revival and the energetic, dynamic, powerful music of the blacks, which had fascinated and inspired western swing musicians for so long.

One of Texas' major rockabilly figures was Roy Orbison, born in Vernon in 1936. His first real band was formed in Wink, Texas, and was known as the Wink Westerners, a band that became prominent through a radio show. Although he was one of the early Sun Records rockabillys, Orbison's high, strained, liquid, totally unique voice and style drew little from country music or Texas music, and gave little to it in return, although partly because of its very uniqueness it has made him extraordinarily popular—particularly overseas—for years.

Texas' contribution to rockabilly was impressive, but not on the magnitude of Memphis. There was a pretty popular band called Sid King and the Five Strings, and Bob Loman, who, after his "Let's Think About Living" rockabilly days became a died-in-the-wool Texan-in-Nashville. Fort Worth native Charles Erwin "Mac" Curtis was successful, as was the Big Bopper, a huge, crewcut bear of an ex-disc jockey named J. P. Richardson, who scored with "Chantilly Lace" before that celebrated plane crash ended his career and his life. And there was that other passenger on that small plane: Buddy Holly.

Born Charles Hardin Holly in Lubbock in 1936, Buddy Holly showed an early interest in performing, singing tenor in a country duo in high school, which became his first professional job after graduation. Known as Buddy and Bob ("western and bop"), their style was a blend typical of the emerging rockabilly style: Western and bop—that somehow seems to sum it up. When they were scouted by

Decca Records, however, it was Buddy who was signed, not Bob, and Holly did his first recordings—unsuccessful recordings, as it turns out—in Nashville, backed by Nashville studiomen. When he caught on, however, it was explosive, creating a legend in less than two years. “That’ll Be the Day” was released in June 1957, and Holly died (along with singer Richie Valens and the Big Bopper) in February of 1959. Holly’s music was alive and innocent and bursting with energy and sounds, which, for all his hiccuping mannerisms, are not so terribly dated today.

Two of his sidemen were to join him on that plane that night as well, but gave up their seats to the headliners. Both fellow Texans, they have each gone on to make large impressions on country music themselves. The lead guitarist was Oklahoma-born Tommy Allsup, whose roots were so deep into western swing that he played with Art Davis’ Rhythm Riders as well as Holly, and cut several “countryopolitan” guitar albums as well. Today an occasional session musician in Nashville, Allsup is a well-known producer who has recorded Hank Thompson, neoswing stars Asleep at the Wheel, and the master himself, Bob Wills, late in his career.

The bass player was a youngster from Littlefield named Waylon Jennings, who put together a lot of the elements of Texas music to become one of the leaders of the Texas revival and one of the most influential performers of our day. With a touch of cowboy and a dollop of rockabilly and a great large helping of pure, old-fashioned honky-tonk, Jennings has,

after an uncomfortable Texas-in-Nashville period of country/folk in the mid-1960s, blossomed into a leader of the highly publicized outlaw faction—singer-songwriters going their own way, doing their own music, flaunting—and succeeding at flaunting—the established Nashville way of doing things.

The *de facto* leader of the outlaw movement (although it can be said, in some ways, to have begun with a sometime Texan, Kris Kristofferson) is Willie Nelson, who stepped out of the honky-tonk genre into the Nashville scene in the early 1960s and astonished the professional world with his awesome song-writing abilities: “Night Life,” “Crazy,” “Hello Walls,” “Ain’t It Funny How Time Slips Away,” and many, many others. Although he tried extremely hard to fit into the up-and-comer’s role (especially as the Nehru-jacketed featured vocalist on Ernest Tubb’s syndicated television show), his singing was just too odd, too different, too jazzy and strangely toned and phrased, and his successes as a singer were rather limited, despite the continued successes of his songs.

Fed up with being a Texan-in-Nashville, tired of limited success, feeling he was going nowhere, Willie moved back to Texas around 1970, and the results were explosive: Somehow the Texas counterculture was ready for Willie’s musical adventurousness; somehow he was able to appeal with remarkable strength to longhair and redneck alike, and in bringing together these cultures brought about the energetic and vital musical interplay loosely called the Austin sound.

Not that what Willie was doing was all that new: The three biggest hits of his outlaw period were songs not any more recent than twenty-five years old: "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," "Remember Me," and "If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time," which was even done in the same key and in the same tempo as Lefty Frizzell's original! Yet, as always seems to happen, whenever the music gets too complicated, too sophisticated, too formulaic, somebody—be it Jimmie Rodgers or Hank Williams or Elvis or Willie Nelson—comes up with music of urgency, of intensity, and most of all, of simplicity. It is the cyclical nature of music demonstrated once again. This time it was Willie who did the trick.

The rise of Austin and its attendant culture and sound, and the faddish national interest in cowboy song, life, and culture all point to Texas as, if not the new capital of country music, then the place where most of the action, energy, and creativity are. In a way it is true, and few would disagree that it has been a healthy, invigorating, stimulating thing for country music in general. And it also points to the remarkably long-term contribution of Texas on country music as a whole. From Eck Robertson's first recording to Willie Nelson's latest No. 1, the Lone Star State has contributed a great deal more than its share of sound, style, inventiveness, influential men and women, and most of all creativity to the world of country music.



# The Singing Cowboys

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The legend of the cowboy is unique in the annals of American history, the one purely American tradition. Thus, to look at the legend of the cowboy in his travails through the “dime novels” of the late 1800s and the movie Westerns from their beginning to the present is to look not simply at the cowboy as he really was but at the cowboy as a series of narrow reflections of the country’s most basic (and changing) wants and needs embodied in one continuing character.

There are certain basic qualities in the legend of the cowboy that have become universal despite the changes wrought upon him through the passing of time. In the simplest possible terms, the legend of the cowboy created a man of destiny. He was a free man, unencumbered by the encroachment of pending civilization, although each act he performed brought that same civilization one step closer to its

final result: the cowboy’s total demise and the full domestication of the Old West. That is the one inescapable fact. In the legend of the cowboy, settlers involved in the civilizing process needed the cowboy much more than the cowboy needed civilization. He was a loner, independent, self-reliant, existing in a violent, untamed world. He was deadly when crossed. His struggle with the elements, whether they were man-made or products of nature at her most awesome, was not a civilized one, but rather an archetypal struggle of sheer survival in the terrifying midst of the unknown, and it was not a struggle to be easily shirked. If there was a challenge, the challenge must be met with all that was available to him, and those tools, too, were largely elemental: courage, skills of survival, an understanding of the land and its untold dangers, and a dogged determination. There was

little else at his beck and call, and if he failed, the one reality was his death. It was that reality that lent him a certain awareness of his own mortality and insignificance, but at the same time managed to elevate his struggle for survival to a position of greater importance than the mere meaninglessness of his life. The struggle was everything, because there was no reward but his own destruction. The tools of survival that he mastered were rendered obsolete as the homesteaders and the barbed wire localized him and drew him further and further into the world of domestication.

The cowboy provided a terrific legend that lent itself perfectly to the dreams and fantasies of a people finding the restraints of growing modernity binding and claustrophobic. The cowboy, with his sense of freedom and simplicity of action, offered not only the hope of escape, but also the realization that if the cowboy got his job done, we would all have warm beds to come home to each night. You couldn't ask more of any legend.

But who was the real cowboy, and what was on his mind? As one scholar noted: "The cowboy needed no particular ability except to sit on a horse and pay attention." If we are to believe *authentic* accounts of the life of a cowboy, his was a lot that was more tiresome than heroic and more boring than romantic—or as a cowboy himself said: "There are more cows and less butter, more rivers and less water, and you can see farther and see less than any place in the world."

Following the Civil War, with the South in ruins and overrun with carpetbaggers, and the North attempting



Roy Rogers.

to restructure a total society, there were thousands upon thousands of young men who had nothing to return to. Houses, farms, and cities were gone. Families had been torn apart, if not destroyed, and the broken pieces were simply too scattered to put back together. So many men—soldiers, freed slaves, the displaced, the restless, the adventurers, and more than a few renegades—went West. With them all went the rivalry of the Blue and the Gray, complete with the legacy of violence and chaos, as they all began carving out a new life west of the Mississippi.

That life was based on the long-horn cattle that were descendants of animals brought to Mexico by the Spanish in the 1600s. By 1800, these hardy beasts numbered in the hundreds of thousands as they roamed at large over the southern plains. The use of the animal for its tallow, hide, bones for fertilizer, and meat constituted the wealth of the land, but the cattle trade was disorganized and monopolized by shippers on the Gulf Coast.

It was not a major industry by any means, and the Civil War put a further crimp in its development by drawing off the manpower and closing many markets. The situation changed abruptly when the war ended; the men returned to civilian life, and a peacetime economy opened markets back up again.

In 1867, Abilene opened up as the first stockyard to which cattle from all over Texas were driven, then shipped North by rail to the slaughter- and packinghouses of Chicago. The use of the train was a revolutionary idea, both in its efficiency and its introduction of beef to the diet of Easterners. The man who put it all together was Joseph McCoy, a young Chicago livestock trader who knew that cattle on the hoof on their own range were worth but four bucks a head. McCoy offered forty bucks a head for all cattle delivered to Abilene, while promising Chicago that he would deliver two hundred thousand head within a decade. Within the first four years of operation, however, he shipped two million cattle North, exceeding even his wildest dreams, and thus gave rise to the term "the real McCoy."

It was the cowboy's role to cover the entire range where the cattle roamed, to brand new calves, to drive the cattle into herds, and then to herd the cattle to the railroad. Suffice it to say that it was rough out there. The cowboy's life was hard and lonely, the elements unrelenting whether it was winter or summer, the food awful, and his only real companion was the wretched (but perfectly suited) little pony he rode. The dangers were real enough, ranging from irate settlers fearful of their plowed land being trampled, to irate Indians, to being thrown from a horse and mangled in one of the frequent stampedes. For the most part, however, his life was one of simple and constant drudgery, except for the infrequent stops at the end of a drive in one of the famous cowtowns. There the cowboy indulged himself in all the luxuries of civilization: gambling, loose women, poison whiskey, and fast guns. Given that the days in such towns were few in comparison to the days in the saddle, the hell-raising was a release valve for the endless solitude of the range. And they really blew it off.

East of the Mississippi, those who stayed behind to reshape the broken remnants looked West with keen interest. With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, the western expansion of the telegraph, and the growing number of roving correspondents for the eastern papers, the people were kept more than simply abreast of western developments. They were force-fed the details of the Indian wars, the shootouts, the cattle drives, and life out West in general. And the Easterners loved it. Simple interest quickly grew into rap-

ture, and the legend of the cowboy was born.

To nurture that rapture, the “dime novel” was created to glorify the West, and the “details” that whetted the Easterner’s interest soon turned to heroics fraught with gross exaggeration and misinformation. It was, however, just the tonic that the East needed to revive the spirit of a nation staggering through a postwar depression, revealing as it did (and in the most romantic of terms) a united nation turning the combined energies of the Blue and the Gray into a glorious decimation of a common enemy: the redskin. The conquering of the West was to be our salvation, and to conquer an enemy in print, heroes were necessary.

William “Buffalo Bill” Cody was the initial focus of the eastern adulation (although interviews with and stories of Wild Bill Hickock were also quite popular). Cody had established his credentials as a genuine western hero early. He was left the man of his family at eleven, and worked on a number of wagon trains that took him as far as Fort Laramie. There he met the great trapper Jim Bridger and the great pathfinder Kit Carson, from whom he learned sign language as well as the language of the Sioux. Before Bill was fifteen he had trapped, panned gold, and ridden for the Pony Express. He returned to Kansas and worked as a general roustabout, fought with the Jayhawkers conducting a guerrilla war against Quantrill’s Raiders, served as an Indian scout for the cavalry, and woke up one morning to find that he’d enlisted in the Union forces while under the influence of a terrific drunk. In

fifteen months he rose from recruit to full private, and was discharged honorably as a hospital orderly. Following the war, Bill returned to scouting, and then, in 1868, was hired to kill buffalo to feed the workers laying track on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. In 18 months, at \$500 per month, he killed 4,280 of the dumb beasts, carving off only the hump and the hind-quarters and leaving the rest to rot in the sun. It was this feat that garnered Bill Cody his first public notice, and from that point on “the noted guide” would forever be known as Buffalo Bill.

When Ned Buntline, the leading “dime novelist” of his time, went West in 1869 to find a new hero, Buffalo Bill was ready and waiting. The legends of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett had long since ceased to interest the East. All eyes had turned toward western expansion—the *new* West—and Bill fit the bill perfectly. Within a year he was a national hero by virtue of a few meager facts, an assortment of tall tales, the racial arrogance of an Anglo-Saxon nation that truly believed in “Manifest Destiny,” and last, but not least, the mass production and distribution of the “dime novels” following the widespread use of the continuous-roll printing press introduced in the mid-1860s. It’s said that in the first meeting between Buntline and Cody, Buntline took a snippet of conversation from here, a callous boast from there, a few humble homilies, and turned each into a rugged, stirring adventure with such titles as *Buffalo Bill: The King of the Border*, *Buffalo Bill’s Best Shot*, or *The Heart of Spotted Tale*, and *Buffalo Bill’s Last Victory*, or *Dove Eye*,

*The Lodge Queen*. They touched a vital chord.

In 1894, Bill cashed in on yet another brand-new entertainment sensation: Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope, the hand-cranked peep-show machine that gave each viewer five different but short examples of the magic of the moving picture for a quarter. Edison himself took Bill, Annie Oakley, Lost Horse, and Short Bull (the latter one of the few Indians who had both seen the Indian Messiah and learned the Ghost dance from Him) into his studio in West Orange, New Jersey, and made the first Western Kinetoscopes: Bill and Short Bull "talking" in sign language; Annie's sharpshooting skills; Lost Horse performing the Buffalo Dance. Eventually, Edison also filmed *The Parade of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*, *The Procession of Mounted Indians*, *The Buck Dance*, *The Ghost Dance*, and other staged mini-documentaries. These little flash films played coast to coast as penny arcades sprung up in city after city. In a not so prophetic aside to Bill during one shooting, Edison confided, however, "The development of the big screen will spoil everything. We're making these peep shows and selling a lot of them at a profit. If we put out a screen machine, there will be use for maybe about ten of them in the whole country."

Nonetheless, the silver screen full of moving images bigger than life *did* develop (and with Edison at the forefront, naturally, whistling a different tune), and its unveiling in New York in 1896 created a sensation; people could sit in a chair and watch Fatima dancing at the World's Columbian

Exposition at Chicago, or Sarah Bernhardt perform the dueling scene from *Hamlet*, or the *Pennsylvania Limited* roaring, at sixty miles an hour, straight at them (which sent men, women, and children screaming for the nearest door the first time they saw it). It was an unprecedented and godlike experience, and by 1906 *Billboard* reported: "Store shows and five-cent picture theaters might properly be called the jackrabbits of the business of public entertaining because they multiply so rapidly."

The year 1903 was a turning point for movies in general and the Western in particular when Edison released *The Great Train Robbery*, a film often regarded as the first feature (a grueling ten minutes long) and the first Western (a disputed claim). It was a true narrative film, and established once and for all the basic Western formula of crime, pursuit, showdown, and justice, in addition to highlighting the Western movie staples of fist fights, saloons, horse chases, gunplay, and plenty of action. It was a well-paced film, and the fact that it was filmed in New Jersey with men who rode horses as if the beasts had been invented yesterday didn't bother theater patrons one bit (as if they really knew). *The Great Train Robbery* was a giant success, and is credited as being *the* reason why theaters were established in many towns and cities. For a high percentage of Americans, it was the first moving picture they had ever seen, and they were in awe. The movie industry had a major bankable commodity. Imitations of *The Great Train Robbery* proliferated, and sometimes those imitations

were a scene-by-scene ripoff with nothing changed except perhaps the calendar date hanging on the wall of the stationmaster's office. Edison even produced a tongue-in-cheek version called *The Little Train Robbery*, featuring a cast of children on ponies.

The one essential missing ingredient, however, was the star, the hero, the source of audience identification. Buffalo Bill was dead (he died broken and practically penniless, a casualty of modern times and technology, in 1917). It was time for the cowboy legend to be transferred from print to celluloid, and the man who embodied the transition came, strangely enough, from the cast of *The Great Train Robbery*. He became not only the first cowboy movie star, but also the first movie star of any kind.

G. M. Anderson (born Max Aronson), a big, beefy former model who had once posed in dude cowboy gear for the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in the midst of a singularly unsuccessful vaudeville career, was cast in *The Great Train Robbery*, but when he revealed he couldn't even get on a horse, much less stay on one, he was pushed into the background. Anderson, however, didn't really care, because he was only interested in making a few bucks. A few months later, however, when he wandered into a theater to see the movie, he was amazed at the tumultuous reception the film received, and from that night on the possibilities of the film medium excited him. He wasn't interested simply in performing in front of the cameras, but rather wanted to produce and direct. He moved to Chicago and got into the business, pro-

ducing and directing rather undistinguished one- and two-reel Westerns and early Ben Turpin comedies. Then, in a strange and unplanned twist, Anderson packed up and moved West to Niles, California, twenty miles south of San Francisco, to launch a West Coast studio. It wasn't exactly Hollywood, but it was the first production unit in the Golden State.

Once again, Anderson set out to make Westerns, taking advantage of the rolling hillsides and the frost-free weather. He also had something else in mind, something brand-new: a cowboy hero with a distinct personality. Stars, however, were difficult to come by in Niles, and finally he chose to play the hero himself. It would be nice to say that it was a wise and calculated move, but as it turns out, it was merely a matter of circumstance. There was just no one else.

Anderson was still big, still beefy, not terribly handsome (but then there were no Robert Redfords or Roy Rogers to compare himself with), but he did have a certain sincerity, and that, in addition to a fumbling but ingratiating awkwardness when it came to dealing with the ladies (on the screen, of course) and the ability to throw his brawn around effectively in a fight, made him an instant hit. The first film was *Broncho Billy and the Baby*, a sentimental tale in the "dime novel" tradition in which Broncho Billy, a "good-bad man," gives up his chance for freedom to save a child who finally reforms him. Anderson had no idea just how successful the film was to be, but three months later he realized that he would forever be a Broncho Billy in the