Country Music and the Anglo-American Tradition
Country music is one of the most formidable commercial products in the American music industry, superseded only by rock. Like the people who created it, it has spread from farms and small towns to the city, consequently taking on the city's diversity and sophistication. Throughout the years of its commercial development, country music has incorporated into its style blues, ragtime, New Orleans jazz, swing, rock, and easy-listening. Yet even though country music has become an international phenomenon and a multimillion dollar industry, it has managed to retain the basic character and values of its southern, rural, Anglo-Celtic origin.

**WHAT IS COUNTRY ABOUT COUNTRY MUSIC?**

One thing that makes country music "country" is that it was developed by rural dwellers. While the fact should be obvious, it is important to understand that for years country music has been produced in urban centers like Nashville, New York, and Hollywood. What keeps country music country is that it continues to draw from the imagery and values of rural life and the common folk who live that life.

The majority of top country stars have been Anglo-American, male, and from the poor and working-class rural South. With the development of media technology, these entertainers have become international commercial stars, but they have never lost touch with their roots. To understand the distinctiveness of country music, it is important to understand the South and the culture it reflects.

When settlers from the British Isles arrived in the New World, the warm climate and fertile soil of the American South proved more conducive to agriculture than to industry. The South was sparsely populated; the land taken up not by people but by fields of crops. Farmers were isolated; the nearest neighbor often lived miles away. Cities and towns remained small and widely separated. Farmers occasionally drove to the city to buy supplies or to bring their goods to market, but they did not reside or work there. The competition of black slave labor and the lack of job diversity discouraged new immigrants from settling in the
South, leaving it with little ethnic diversity. This inherent isolationism and restricted interaction resulted in a society that did not change as quickly as the more dynamic social system of the urban/industrial North. So as popular trends in the twentieth century became increasingly urbanized, the South lingered with the tastes and sentiments of the previous century.

The nineteenth-century popular perception of rural life was romantic and sentimental. Rural life was considered serene and pastoral, close to nature and God, a land peopled by rugged individuals who were self-sufficient, a secure and simple place that never changed. This contrasted with the perception of the urban jungle—fast-paced, decadent, dirty, and bewildering, a land of corporate subservience and anonymity. Rural life was hardly as rosy as popular entertainment portrayed it; but rural dwellers liked to think it was, in order to escape from the harsh reality of their existence.

The infrastructure of nineteenth-century southern society was built on a class hierarchy based largely on genealogy—a strong sense of "It's not what you have, it's who you are." The "blue bloods" of the plantation aristocracy, the wealthy landowners from noble European family lines, made up a very small percentage of the southern population. They were greatly outnumbered by their black slaves and the poor whites who toiled on the more inferior, leftover patches of land. After the Civil War the freed slaves and poor whites became mutually entrapped in the tenant farmer and sharecropper systems, working the land of the impersonal plantation owners for meager wages. Company stores extended credit at exorbitant rates, plunging farmers into hopelessly perpetual debt. This situation ultimately led to the mass migration of whites and blacks into the cities of the South and North in the early twentieth century.

The poor whites realized that they were little better off than the former slaves, which left them with an ingrained inferiority complex. They attempted to mask this class consciousness by conjuring up myths of their own superiority and individualism. One myth was the white's natural supremacy to blacks, an illusion that was more intense among poorer whites because of their lower class status and the threat of economic competition with newly freed black farmers and laborers.

Another myth intended to cure the poor white's self-image problem is what Latins would call *machismo* or *macho*, a condition of male strength and virility. Endurance and power is displayed in a man's proficiency at hard physical labor and sports—and in less principled acts like drinking, fighting, and seducing other women (while vehemently protecting the chastity of one's own women).

Male Victorian values saw the ideal woman as chaste and unblemished, a vestal virgin worthy to bear his children, one who reflected the perceived purity of his own mother. While possession of such a cherubic spouse (and possession is what it was considered) made the Victorian man feel more forthright and upstanding in the community, sex was infrequent and unromantic, considered a defilement of the image men had of their women. Eroticism was reserved for mistresses and prostitutes, adultery being considered a less grievous sin than sexual pleasure with one's own wife.

Fundamentalist Christianity seemed to shape and control all other attitudes in the South. The dominant religious sects of the South came about through the Second Awakening, or Great Revival, which took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was a grassroots reaction by the common people to the complex doctrine and cold formality of the Church of England. This was the beginning of camp revival meetings, where impassioned evangelists preached the message
inner turmoil. Historian Bill Malone points out that the southern man was an individual of extreme contradiction, characterizing the South with two antithetical but equally powerful images: "the home of both corn whiskey and Prohibition, and the land of hell-raising good old boys and God-fearing fundamentalists."

The end result of such contradictory behavior is a feeling that, despite leading a godly life, God is ever present and will hold humankind atonable for every transgression. So a feeling of shame pervaded the southern mind. This was most evident in the somber and melancholy sacred and secular music of the South, which laments this earthy travail and looks forward to the reward of the afterlife when the battle between good and evil will end.

One of the most cherished attributes of the southerner is the penchant for rhetoric, the "gift of gab." It is an indulgence in a manner of public speaking and storytelling that demonstrates the orator's talent for eloquence, glorification and bragging, exaggeration (even lying), passion, defiance, and verbosity in general. This is particularly evident in the charismatic delivery of southern preachers, whose programs dominate television and radio airwaves. Some of the most profound moments in the sessions of the United States House and Senate are the colorful speeches by southern senators and congressmen; many have been transcribed and published as popular literature. In the world of entertainment, some of this country's finest storytellers have been southerners like Andy Griffith, Archie Campbell, Tom T. Hall, and Jerry Clower. One of the most refreshing aspects of country songs, compared to other forms of popular music, is that they still tell a story.

### How Country Music Reflects Rural Characteristics

Topics in country songs include exultation of a simpler rural life, ideal love, family ties, religious conviction, male machismo, and the pride of the working class. Country music also addresses the conflicts brought on by the darker side of human nature and the struggle of rural or working-class existence. Some of these conflicts are contradictions within the mind itself; others are the product of the protagonists' altered environment. It is through these conflicts that we derive many of the themes in country music.

Many country songs express the inner conflict between pleasure-seeking and the pursuit of religious devotion or wanderlust and the security of home. The
overriding credo of country music seems to be “No human endeavor is greater than the pursuit of the pure love of God and family,” a credo proclaimed by those who follow that pursuit and by those who wish they had followed it. This moralistic view can be seen in the countless remorseful songs about drinking, infidelity, and the consequences suffered from being away from home.

Why would the portrayal of conflict spell success for country music or any style of popular music? The answer: Because conflict makes for more interesting songs; and our desire to cope with it compels us to write, sing, or listen to those songs. As lyricist Sheila Davis writes, “One reason that sad love songs seem to outnumber happy ones [on top 40 playlists] is that happiness lacks conflict. The ending of a relationship generates more dramatic juice: it’s much easier to find a new slant on ‘You Done Me Wrong’ than to find a fresh way to say ‘I love you.’”

Much of our popular music is about tragedy or the problems of love rather than its virtues; but it is the direct and often self-pitying way in which the problems are expressed in country music that makes it distinctive—and to many people, corny. Country music expresses emotions the way the white working class does, using plain language instead of elegant poetics. This means that country music is not concerned with cleverly disguising or squelching the level of emotion; it talks tough and displays its feelings openly and unabashedly. It is truly “white blues.”

Another major conflict with rural values is the South’s increasing urbanization, which significantly increased by the 1920s. As mentioned earlier, the quicker dog-eat-dog living environment of the city was considered contradictory to the romantic image of rural life, sense of family, religious communalism, and self-sufficient isolation. Yet the statistics of the past 100 years reveal the increasing shift in the southern population from farm to city. The city had an irresistible appeal for rural Americans, especially for youngsters longing for the excitement, wealth, and glamour of the city and an escape from the monotony and drudgery of farm work. That lure was probably heightened around the turn of the century when Tin Pan Alley songs made the shift from glorifying rural quaintness to glorifying urban sophistication.

The move from country to city led to a significant rise in the number of urban, lower middle class. Though they traded their plows for bulldozers and their farms for factories, rural southerners found themselves bewildered and lost in the big city. They fell victim to its pale human relationships and familial strains. This left them longing nostalgically for home, love of family, and the simple rural life—sentiments expressed in great many country songs. However, these transplanted ruralists were unwilling to retreat to the country and settled instead for adapting the rural value system to city life. Country music adapted as the rural dweller did, identifying with the urban blue-collar worker and truck driver as well as the farmer.

THE TRADITION OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN BALLADRY

Country music developed in the southern United States out of the white Anglo-Celtic tradition of ballads, folk songs, and dance music. As recorded anthologies from the Library of Congress will attest, British ballads were not the exclusive property of immigrants to the South; they existed in almost every region of the United States. It was only in the South, however, that the right chemistry of geo-
graphy, social makeup and religion combined with the peculiarly concentrated proximity of blacks and whites to create a distinctive and successful form of commercial music.

Ballads are narrative songs that tell a story. Many British folk ballads are called Child ballads, not because they are for children, but because they were named for Francis James Child (1825–1896). He was an American scholar who collected, analyzed, and published versions of 305 English and Scottish ballads in 10 volumes between 1881 and 1894. The ballads he codified are hundreds of years old and existed purely within oral tradition. Their authors are unknown or forgotten; in fact, the ballads are probably the product of many people who added verses and altered the melodies over years of performing them and handing them down from generation to generation.

British ballads were usually simple songs in strophic form, rolling out repetitively, verse after verse. They were sung, unaccompanied, in an emotionless, plain style, usually by amateurs for their own personal entertainment or, at most, for an intimate gathering in the home. The ballad plots are usually dramatic events between people—such as family feuds and romantic encounters—with no elaboration as to time or place, making them timeless and abstract. They were often doleful and tragic, with melodies in minor modes.

Another type of ballad that came from Britain was the broadside. Broadsides differed from Child ballads, which existed primarily in oral tradition, in that they were composed and printed on large single sheets or in groups called songsters. They were the urban counterpart—the Tin Pan Alley—of British folk ballads. Also, unlike Child ballads, they were more journalistic and topical in nature, dealing with current or historical events such as famous battles, politics, crimes, lovers, or stories of sailors at sea. They date as far back as the sixteenth century, and most were published in London. They were no more adorned or compositionally ambitious than the Child ballads; they were, in fact, quite formulated. Their bare-bones construction, without the benefit of much artistry, clearly reflected the customs, morals, and the living conditions of the people for whom they were produced.

Once Anglo-Celtic immigrants arrived in the South, they began to modify or totally change the subject matter of their Old World ballads to fit their new American experiences. Many of the American-born ballads were topical, similar in design to the broadsides; but they depicted places and events of pioneer America: train wrecks, coal-mine disasters, famous murders, and epic journeys. A distinctive trait of American ballads was the addition of a moral at the end—a gesture the new southern fundamentalism felt compelled to make. When an account of illicit love or a fatal disaster is given, we are warned to avoid a similar fate or to get our affairs in order should it happen to us.

**ETHNIC INFLUENCES ON THE ANGLO-AMERICAN MUSIC TRADITION**

The Anglo-American settlers of the Southeast, especially those who lived in the isolation of the Appalachian Mountains, kept their folkways relatively intact. From colonial times until the expansion westward, the South's ethnic makeup was limited largely to African-Americans and Anglo-Americans. While there has been conflict between southern blacks and whites over the last 400 years, it would
be difficult to find a more intense exchange and assimilation of folkways. It is this unique cultural interchange that distinguishes southern music, including country music, from the music of other regions of the United States. Though they would rarely mix socially, these two ethnic groups were always in close contact. Black "mammies" suckled white babies; poor blacks and poor whites worked together in the fields; they shared the same religion and had similar styles of worship. However slowly, unconsciously, or naturally, blacks and whites came to share speech patterns, cuisine, and, most of all, music.

Blacks had their own tradition of balladry; some were adaptations of Anglo-American ballads, and some were original creations by blacks themselves. Black ballads more closely matched the Old World bawdiness and violence that had been expurgated by the more puritanical southern whites. The subject matter in black ballads tended to focus on individuals who had become legendary for their bad deeds as well as for their good ones. Black ballads usually had no moral overtones, letting the subject's flamboyant acts stand on their own merit. These ballads make the best dramatic use of repetition, and the tunes are generally more interesting. Many of these ballads are commonly used in white country music, such as "Frankie and Albert" (or "Frankie and Johnny"), "Stagger Lee," and "John Henry." When the blues evolved from these black ballads, it was also readily incorporated into white country music.

As the general migration of the South followed the Cotton Belt westward, southerners took many of their folkways (food, architecture, music, and religion) with them, and a certain amount of homogeneity prevails throughout the South to this day. Yet this ethnic makeup would gradually include other groups, who also had an effect on the music.

As Anglo-American southerners migrated, they encountered German immigrants in Arkansas; Germans, Czechs, Poles, and Hispanics in Texas; French Acadians in Louisiana; and various Indian tribes.

**Instruments in Early Country Music**

The song repertoires of various ethnic groups were borrowed by Anglo-Americans, but more influence can be seen in the adoption of musical instruments and instrumental techniques. From the Anglo-Celtic tradition came the legacy of jigs and reels, played on pennywhistles, bagpipes, and fiddles.

The fiddle was the chief instrument of the Anglo-Americans. It is a common folk instrument found throughout northern Europe, and it is the backbone of the early string bands that were featured at the beginning of country music's commercial career. Fiddles were almost always used in the context of country dances and were considered by many Christians the devil's instrument. Even though the fiddle was the old-
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Est instrumental tradition in the Anglo-American culture—and probably the most conservative—it was not immune to change. Every folk fiddler had his own degree of innovation or conservatism; and every instrument in the folk tradition, including the fiddle, seemed to demonstrate a distinctive regional style. For instance, melodic ornamentation in Scottish folk fiddling tended to be done with the bow; Irish melodic ornamentation was done with the fingers. In America around the 1920s, fiddlers, especially those in the Southwest, began to adopt jazz and blues stylings into their hoedown repertoire. (There will be more on this in the discussion of western swing.) In Louisiana, Cajuns played the distinctive “doo-wacka-doo” fiddle rhythm slower and “greasier” than folk fiddlers in other regions of the South.

The guitar is synonymous today with country music, but it did not come into common use until the turn of the century. The Spanish guitar tradition brought over from Europe seemed to have little effect on the Anglo-American tradition; instead, it was the African-American bluesmen, with their distinctive finger picking styles, that caught the attention of white country musicians. As country music moved westward, it picked up guitar techniques from Hispanics in south Texas; but an even greater influence (from around the turn of the century) was the Hawaiian style of sliding a steel bar on the neck of the guitar rather than finger- ing the notes—a technique foreshadowed by black guitarists who used knife blades or the necks of glass bottles to achieve a similar crying effect.

A cousin of the guitar, and an instrument that is equally identified with country music, is the banjo; again we have the African-American tradition to thank. The banjo, in its earliest form, was probably the only indigenous African instrument to survive in the United States. It was used and modified extensively by blackface minstrels in the nineteenth century, who added frets and a shorter fifth string. It is quite likely that the banjo was introduced to Anglo-American southerners by these traveling minstrel shows. By the turn of the century there was the five-string banjo, used in country music of the southeast, and the four-string tenor banjo, used in jazz and Dixieland. The instrument had an archaic, quaint, and even comical image, which would only be changed by innovative bluegrass banjoists, such as Early Scruggs and Don Reno, after 1945.

One other instrument that figures prominently in the development of country music is the mandolin. Although this instrument is usually associated with Italy, it does not seem likely that the instrument was adopted by Anglo-Americans because of contact with Italian immigrants—although we cannot rule out that possibility. It is more likely that the popularity of amateur mandolin orchestras, as a turn-of-the-century pastime, influenced its use in country music. It would become associated with the mandolin/guitar duos of the thirties and bluegrass in the forties.

**Urban Influence on Precommercial Country Music**

Aside from the slow, natural, and unconscious process of change that took place in folk traditions during the Anglo-Americans’ migration and subsequent contact with other cultural groups, there was the process of change due to contact with the commercial products of urban culture. This proves that there was never a “pure” southern Anglo-American folk culture.

Even in colonial times, itinerant singing masters conducted singing schools at rural churches, teaching congregations the sacred songs in their published hymnals. This activity provided training, performing style, and repertoire to country
musicians. Traveling minstrel performers and medicine shows brought the latest styles of urban music and humor to entertain rural audiences. Rural musicians adopted these songs and performing styles into their repertoires as well. The tragic sentimental songs and ballads published and performed in the nineteenth century entered the southern repertoire and have shaped the style and mood of original country songs to this day.

Urban culture did not always come to the country; rural dwellers also went to the city, making contact with the commercial music industry and art music, as well as with the red-light districts that nurtured ragtime, jazz, and the blues. If or when the country dweller returned to the country, he or she took at least some of the music and culture of the city home, influencing fellow rural dwellers.

All the factors that influenced country music went through a mysterious folk process by which they became fused with and dominated by the rural Anglo-American culture. Therefore, the general character of country music is more an Anglo-American reflection of all these diverse cultural elements rather than a direct view of them—the result of a cultural filtering process. Indicative of this Anglo-American cultural dominance is the lack of black performers in country music, despite the sizable contribution of black styles to its evolution; only DeFord Bailey and Charley Pride come to mind. Another somewhat homogenizing effect on culture and music in the South is the general sense of conservatism that has prevailed in that region. This is due to its self-imposed isolationism, its relatively late move toward urbanization and industrialization, and its prevailing rigid fundamentalist Christian views. These are all elements that will change as the South increasingly moves away from a rural agricultural economy to an urban industrial and transportation economy, with all its inherent cultural dynamics.

In the next few chapters we shall see how this summation of country music holds up to the manipulation of the commercial music industry and its urban environment. We shall see that country musicians succeed in making the transformation from folk musician to professional entertainer, but they always manage to maintain a sense of who they are and where they come from.

**Chapter Summary**

Country music is a formidable force in the national commercial music industry; yet the best country music is true to the expression of the working-class people who brought about its beginnings. It reflects a number of ethnic influences but is unique in the way the primarily Anglo-Celtic culture in the southern United States assimilated them. It is a music of class consciousness and moral struggle, of pride and religious piety. It is a rich tradition of storytelling harking back to the epic folk ballads of the British Isles.

Musical forms that made up southern rural folk music include English and Scottish folk ballads (Child ballads), urban broadside ballads, and ballads adapted or composed in the New World. Black folk songs and instrumental styles influenced the Anglo-American tradition early on, and with westward migration there were influences from French, Spanish, German, and other cultures. Additionally, popular music influenced rural dwellers through the traveling shows, whose published songs entered the folk tradition.

**Additional Listening**

Refer to footnote 3 for ballad recordings. The citations that follow are country performances of traditional ballads, broadsides, and fiddle tunes. All are taken from the LP format of *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Country Music*.
(Smithsonian RO25 P8 15640), selected and annotated by Bill Malone, referred to hereafter as SCCCM. This fine eight-LP set went out of print around 1987 and has been succeeded by a second edition (the four-CD format is Smithsonian RD 042 DMC4-0914). While bringing the selections more up-to-date, the second edition is not nearly as comprehensive. In the SCCCM citations that follow, the letters “CD” followed by a disc and track number will indicate that the recording can be found on both editions.

A. C. “Eck” Robertson, “Sallie Gooden” (1922) (SCCCM, 1/1). “Sallie Gooden” is one of the staples of the old fiddle repertoire, a party song played with a number of variations. Dance fiddlers like Robertson were conditioned to play for hours at a stretch. The abrupt ending probably indicates Robertson’s surprise when the wax disc ended after only about three minutes into his performance.

Buell Kazee, “Lady Gay” (Child 79) (1928) (SCCCM, 2/3). This is a southern mountain version of the British ballad “The Wife of Usher’s Well.”

Coon Creek Girls, “Pretty Polly” (British broadside) (1938) (SCCCM, 3/4). The Coon Creek Girls were popular in the Midwest in the 1930s and frequently appeared on the WLS National Barn Dance. The galloping rhythm of the banjo and guitar and the minor mode of the song add to the menacing character of Willie, the murderous rounder. Notice that, curiously, the verse structure is AAB, the same as the blues.

Cliff Carlisle, “Black Jack David” (Child 200) (1939) (SCCCM, 3/3). This is a rendition of the British ballad “The Gypsy Laddie.” The ribald sexual bragging in the song fits well with the bluesy style of Carlisle’s vocal and Dobro steel guitar playing.

**Review Questions**

1. What keeps country music country?
2. Class consciousness is one of the main themes of country music. Describe the class system in the development of southern culture that may account for this.
3. Describe the conflict between the southern social concepts of machismo and fundamentalist Christianity.
4. In what way does country music express sadness that makes it distinctive and, to many, objectionable?
5. What are the differences in a Child ballad, a broadside ballad, and an Anglo-American ballad? How do you characterize African-American ballads?
6. What were the musical contributions of other ethnic groups to the developing Anglo-American musical tradition?
7. Describe the background of the instruments used in country music. Which instrument is the oldest in the Anglo-American tradition?
8. How did professional performances and published music influence country music before radio and recordings?

**Video Source**

*America’s Music: The Roots of Country* (VHS formats, 6-volume set, Turner Home Entertainment, 1996). This video set is a long overdue survey of country music. Meticulously researched and presented, it covers country from its folk roots to the music of its release in 1996. This series was originally aired on the TBS cable channel.
Notes

As important as radio was to the spread of all popular music, it was particularly crucial in the commercial development of country music. Rural isolation and comparatively lower incomes made the purchase of phonograph records difficult for southerners. Radio was as important as the railroads in linking farms with cities.

Of the more than 500 radio stations in 1922, 89 were in the South. At this point in their history, these stations were low-wattage local affairs, serving the informational needs and entertainment tastes of their immediate area. Radio gave popular local entertainers a new medium for reaching their audience. Championship fiddlers, string bands, singers, preachers, and politicians—perennial favorites at rallies, picnics, and county fairs—could now reach an entire community of households with one appearance on the radio.

Today Nashville is synonymous with country music; but at the beginning of country music's commercialization, the key city was Atlanta, Georgia. Atlanta radio station WSB went on the air in March 1922, the first radio station in the South. In the course of its daily programming, it featured favorite local acts such as Fiddlin' John Carson, Reverend Andy Jenkins, and Gid Tanner, all of whom would become the first country recording stars.

**RALPH PEER AND THE FIRST COUNTRY RECORDS**

In 1920 songwriter Perry Bradford persuaded the General Phonograph Company (GPC) to make the first blues recording performed by a black singer. The success of this event proved that there was a viable market outside the white, urban middle class. By the 1920s the record industry was suffering from the competition of radio and started emulating radio's efforts to serve the special entertainment interests of various regional and ethnic groups. This led to the establishment of race record labels and the dispatching of talent scouts to southern cities in search of folksingers.
The earliest recording expeditions to the South were conducted by Ralph Peer (1892–1960), a producer for GPC. One of his largest race record distributors was Polk Brockman, owner of a family furniture store in Atlanta and the region’s most successful distributor of race records. Brockman persuaded Peer to record “Fiddlin’” John Carson (1868–1949), a champion fiddler and singer, a favorite with white Atlanta audiences for years, and a star on WSB. Peer recorded Carson performing “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Crow” in June 1923. The recording was released on GPC’s Okeh race label along with their black blues recordings and was intended solely for the Atlanta market. History repeated itself; just as the popularity of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” reached far beyond the financial and demographic expectations of its producers, so did Carson’s record. Carson was signed to an exclusive Okeh contract and went on to make well over one hundred records. Thus Carson became the first commercial country recording artist. Ralph Peer continued to seek out and produce country artists, including the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, and became as important a figure in the development of country music as John Hammond was to jazz and the popularity of swing.

Analysis of “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” (SCCC/W, 1/2)

This is not a traditional folk song but a popular song composed by Will Hays in 1871, demonstrating once again that popular music was well known to southern musicians and performed by them in these early years. The lyric is typical minstrel fare: Sung by a blackface character, it is nostalgic and sentimental. The decaying plantation is a metaphor for the singer’s own aging and loneliness.

Now I’m getting old and feeble, and I cannot work no more.  
That rusty bladed hoe I’ve laid to rest.  
Old Massus and old Missus they are sleeping side by side.  
Their spirits now are roaming with the blest.  
Things have changed about the place now, and the darkies they have gone.  
You’ll never hear them singing in the cane.  
But the only friend that’s left here is that good old dog of mine,  
And the little old log cabin in the lane.  

Chorus:  
The chimney’s falling down, and the roof’s all caved in  
Let’s in the sunshine and the rain;  
But the angel’s watching over me when I lay down to sleep  
In my little old log cabin in the lane.  

Now the footpath is growed up that led us ’round the hill,  
The fences all gone to decay.  
The pond it’s done dried up where we once did go to mill.  
Things have turned its course another way.  
Well, I ain’t got long to stay here; what little time I’ve got  
I’ll try to rest contented while I remain,  
Until death shall call this dog and me to find a better home  
Than our little old log cabin in the lane.  

Fiddlin’ John Carson’s vocal style is typical of traditional country performers; he sings in a formal, church-delivered manner and does not act out the lyric or
display emotion in his rendering. (Peer did not approve of Carson’s singing, but Brockman assured him that it was the style accepted by his audience.)

Instead of playing a more subordinate accompaniment on his fiddle, Carson plays the melody as he sings it. He uses the melody of the verse as an instrumental introduction, as an interlude between verses and as an ending. He does not play a rhythmic accompaniment on the fiddle, and the only harmony is provided by the droning of open strings. The final fiddle passage ends rather abruptly in mid-verse; Carson, accustomed to playing longer stretches than a 78 rpm recording allows, was apparently surprised by the producer’s cue to stop.

Soon after John Carson’s initial success, other companies began seeking country performers to record for commercial release. From the beginning, these musicians were aware of their race record status and the stereotyped perception of white southerners; and they accommodated the minstrel-show slant in marketing their product. They took on colorful names like Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers, Doc Bates and His Possum Hunters, the Fruit Jar Drinkers, and the Gully Jumpers. They sometimes dressed in straw hats and ragged clothes—rube costumes as they called them—and performed cornball vaudeville acts called rural dramas.

At first, promoters had a hard time finding a name for the music, calling it old time music, hill country tunes, and the like. The name that became most common typified the hick image that was most often imposed upon it: hillbilly music.

Gid Tanner (1885–1960) is a good example of these early country entertainers. Tanner was a hootenanny fiddler and often performed with Riley Puckett, a blind guitarist and singer. They were popular entertainers on WSB in Atlanta and began recording for Columbia in 1924. By 1926 they added another fiddle and a banjo to form the Skillet Lickers. They not only recorded traditional fiddle tunes, ballads, and breakdowns but also ragtime, blues, and Tin Pan Alley songs.

### Analysis of “Soldier’s Joy” (SCCCM, 1/8)

“Soldier’s Joy” is a traditional English fiddle tune performed by Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers. The form is typical of most fiddle tunes: It is in two sections, verse/chorus, with the first part in a lower fiddle register than the second. The two-part form alternates with a vocal based only on the melody of the verse.
The recording opens with a spoken introduction by Tanner, fashioned after the way he would announce tunes on the radio. The verse to the tune begins immediately with Tanner and fiddler Clayton McMichen playing more or less in unison. The vocal and guitar accompaniment are supplied by Riley Puckett.

We can only speculate as to how much the fiddlers adhere to the traditional melody of "Soldier's Joy," but the lyric is definitely rural South. Fiddlers often added lyrics to fiddle tunes to break the monotony of long dance sets. The lyrics were often nonsense or based on the most mundane of subject matter—in this case, the price of pole beans or "Grandpapa sittin' on a sweet 'tater vine."

Toward the end of the performance, the fiddlers move from a constant sixteenth-note rhythm to a strident doo-whacka-doo gallop on the verse. Unlike the recordings by fiddlers John Carson and Eck Robertson, who merely stopped when the recording ran out, the Skillet Lickers play a slick "shave and a haircut" ending.

**Tin Pan Alley Joins in the Country Craze**

The new hillbilly market soon came to the attention of the popular-music industry in New York. Ragtime, blues, and jazz were considered quaint and unmenacing musics from the hinterlands at first; but when it became apparent that they were forces to be reckoned with, the music establishment tried to imitate and formulate them. So it was only a matter of time before someone outside the southern milieu would try to cash in on the newest regional phenomenon.

The most successful of the Tin Pan Alley country artists was Vernon Dalhart (1883-1948). Born Marion Slaughter, in Jefferson, Texas, he sang light opera and popular music for Edison and Victor records in the 1910s. He took his stage name from two Texas cities. When his popularity waned in the early twenties, he began to record hillbilly material. His most successful recording was "Wreck of the Old 97" (SCCCM, 1/5) and "The Prisoner's Song" (SCCCM, 1/6), both recorded in 1924. This record became one of the top sellers in Victor's catalog, catapulted Dalhart to national fame, and, despite its artificiality, gave a tremendous boost to the fledgling country-music market. It also established two of the most enduring themes in country music: the event song, broadsidelike ballads of
Vernon Dalhart, a former pop singer who made a tremendous comeback in the 1920s as a country singer.

news events (usually monumental tragedies), and prison songs, most often a lament by someone wrongly sent to prison.

As country music progressed through the 1920s, new country songs penned by commercial composers began to compete with traditional music and nineteenth-century sentimental songs. Kansas-born Carson Robison (1890–1957), a frequent accompanist for Vernon Dalhart, became a successful writer of event songs, literally referring to the day’s newspapers for ideas. Another significant early country songwriter was Memphis-born Bob Miller (1895–1955), who wrote over seven thousand songs from his publishing company in New York. His “Twenty-One Years” (SCCCM, 3/5) eclipsed Dalhart’s “The Prisoner’s Song” as the prison song and led to several sequels.

The Solemn Old Judge and the Barn Dance

As radio grew in the early twenties, stations in the South and Midwest peppered traditional music throughout their broadcasting day, along with popular parlor music by staff orchestras and singers. As early as 1922, WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, began featuring a lengthier program of barn-dance music with M. J. Bonner, a fiddler whose band had previously specialized in Hawaiian music. Other attempts at a barn-dance format were tried, but none had the success of WLS’s National Barn Dance (NBD) in Chicago and WSM’s Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. These two shows had a common element: an announcer from Indiana named George D. Hay. In 1919 Hay was a reporter in Memphis, and he was sent to cover a war hero's funeral in Arkansas. While there he witnessed a barn dance and gained the inspiration to showcase the music of the common people. He got his first opportunity to do so in 1924, when WLS in Chicago hired him to develop and announce a new radio barn-dance show. A year later the National Life & Accident Insurance Company in Nashville started station WSM and hired Hay to establish a barn-dance show for them.

Drawing upon the rich folk-music heritage of the hill country of Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina, the WSM Barn Dance was born. The show’s original cast consisted only of Hay, “the solemn old judge,” Uncle Jimmy Thompson, an octogenarian fiddler, and Thompson’s niece on piano. Soon local amateur solo and group acts began to vie for a spot on the show, playing gratis, with no commercial sponsorship, solely for the thrill of appearing on the radio.

Hay created and carefully guarded the folk ideal of the show, and it was he who gave it its distinctive name, Grand Ole Opry. Once the National Broadcasting Company established network radio in 1926, the usual programming routine was to carry successive portions of radio shows from around the country, often in eclectic combinations. As a prime example of this penchant for glaring contrast, the WSM Barn Dance followed Dr. Walter Damrosch and the NBC Symphony Orchestra’s Music Appreciation Hour from New York each Saturday evening. As a good-natured ad lib one night, Hay held his folksy show up to the preceding program by calling it the Grand Ole Opry, a name that stuck and gave his show an element of national distinction.

Since radio programs have come and gone and records have remained, it is easy for us to give too much weight to an artist’s recorded output as a measure of his or her significance in music history. In fact, radio and live appearances were
the vehicles most used for an entertainer’s rise to popularity; many of country music’s most enduring acts crested their careers upon appearing on the National Barn Dance in Chicago and the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. The NBD faded away some years ago; but if you haven’t made it on the Opry, you haven’t made it!

The Bristol Sessions
Back in the realm of recorded music, Ralph Peer had established himself as a successful freelance talent scout and producer of hillbilly music, most often supplying his product to Victor records. In July and August of 1927, Peer made a field trip to Bristol, Tennessee, located in the northeast corner of the state among the Smokey Mountains and bordering Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky. It was here he would discover two of the most important acts of early country music and establish its two primary strains: a conservative southeastern strain and an eclectic southwestern strain. The first was exemplified in the work of the Carter Family from Virginia and the second in the work of Jimmie Rodgers of Mississippi.

The Carter Family
The Carter Family was from Virginia and, until their retirement in 1943, preserved the traditional music of their native Appalachian Mountains. Their material included parlor songs, sacred music, and original music, all evoking memories of family stability, the godly life, human tragedy, and secure rural life. Their “God, Mom, and home” theme exemplified the conservative old-time approach of the southeast and would be one of the major influences on bluegrass music in the 1940s.

In the beginning the Carter Family consisted of A. P. Carter and his wife Sara. Born in 1891 in the Clinch Mountains of Virginia, A. P. learned to play fiddle as a child but abandoned it as an adult to devote himself to singing. He collected hun-


dreds of traditional folk songs. He married Sara in 1915, and they played for local gatherings for the next 11 years. Sara played the guitar, banjo, and autoharp, a strummed multi-string instrument with buttons that, when depressed, stop some strings and let others ring to play different chords. Eventually, A. P.’s sister-in-law, Maybelle, joined the group. Maybelle primarily played a Gibson L-5 guitar and developed a complex style of playing the melody on the lower strings. She tuned the guitar lower than the standard, a tuning still used by bluegrass guitarists today.

After successfully auditioning for Ralph Peer in Bristol, Tennessee, in 1927, the three members of the Carter Family signed a contract with Victor Records. Over the next seven years they recorded some of their most enduring songs, including “Wildwood Flower,” “Wabash Cannonball,” and their signature song, “Keep on the Sunny Side.” Many of the traditional songs they performed were, from then on, known as Carter Family songs. The Depression took its toll on the act, splitting them up in search of work. They often only saw each other at recording sessions. In 1935 they moved to the ARC label: later they recorded for Decca. They also resuscitated their career in a lucrative radio contract with XERF in Del Rio, Texas. With the station’s vast broadcast range, the Carters found wide, newfound popularity and influence. (The significance of Decca Records and border radio “X” stations on country music, particularly that of the Southwest, is discussed in Chapter 12.)

Unfortunately, A. P. and Sara’s marriage fell apart and so did the group. They made fitful comeback appearances in various combinations over the subsequent years. Maybelle formed an act with her three daughters, one being June Carter, who later married country and rockabilly legend Johnny Cash. Their daughter, Rosanne Cash, enjoyed brief celebrity status, and her former husband, Rodney Crowell, has long been an in-demand country performer and songwriter.

The Carter Family has been a tremendous influence in country music history, not only on the traditional side of country styles but on folk and rock musicians such as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, and Bill Monroe and a legion of bluegrass musicians. Maybelle’s guitar set a standard in the tradition of country music guitar picking, influencing legendary country guitarists such as Merle Travis and Chet Atkins (who actually began his career playing for Maybelle and her daughters). The Carter Family’s place in country music is so monumental that they became the first inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970.

Analysis of “Wildwood Flower” (SCCCM, 2/7)

“Wildwood Flower” was recorded by the Carter Family in 1928 at Victor Studios in Camden, New Jersey. It features Sara Carter as vocalist accompanied by Maybelle Carter on guitar. “Wildwood Flower” came from a nineteenth-century
parlor song called "The Pale Amaranthus." You will notice the archaic style of the lyric.

Sara Carter's vocal style is typical of traditional mountain singing and hails back to the vocal practice for rural English balladry. Her vocal sound is unadorned by the coloration of a vibrato and is very nasal in quality (the country "twang" you have perhaps heard about). There are also the distinctive elements of Appalachian pronunciation that affect Sara's vocal delivery, such as in the line "wavy black hair." "Hair" is pronounced "har"; and Sara chooses to hold out her note, singing through the "r" sound, which gives her vocal timbre a constricted quality on to the more open "a" vowel sound, rather than holding. The style is reserved and formal, intentionally holding back a dramatic or emotional delivery of the lyric, no matter how tragic, religiously fervent, or otherwise compelling.

The most celebrated feature of this recording is Maybelle Carter's guitar playing. Her accompaniment and instrumental verses between Sara's sung verses are the most imitated in country guitar and are the goal of all fledgling players. Maybelle picks the melody on the lower strings and strums the accompanying chords and rhythms on the upper strings with a downstroke. To achieve this effect of two guitarists (one lead and one rhythm), Maybelle must quickly alternate between picking and strumming without sacrificing smoothness or continuity in either, a goal she accomplishes most successfully.

The form is strophic, a succession of verses with no chorus or contrasting formal material. Sara and Maybelle alternate vocal and instrumental verses. The verse is actually 16 measures long, four phrases of four measures; but the Carters add an extra measure after the first, second, and fourth phrase, extending the verse length to 19 measures. This practice of giving the singer a little extra time to catch a breath for the next phrase would carry over into bluegrass.

**Jimmie Rodgers**

The Carter Family helped to establish the conservative southeastern style of country music. A more eclectic, blues- and pop-based music would emanate from the southwest, kindled by Jimmie Rodgers. He has rightfully been called "the fa-
Jimmie Rodgers and his family with Ralph Peer and his wife at Rodgers's Texas home.

Chapter 11  Early Commercialization of Country Music  139

Jimmie Rodgers and his family with Ralph Peer and his wife at Rodgers's Texas home.

Jimmie Charles Rodgers (1897-1933) was born near Meridian, Mississippi, son of a railroad worker. He also worked the railroad, wandering up and down the line in search of odd jobs. The mythology and romance of trains and railroads pervade American music and folklore, representing freedom and the passage to a better life for some and wandering and loneliness to others. Rodgers and his music will forever be associated with the images and myths of the railroad.

Rodgers was conversant with traditional country material, ballads of the railroad workers, and black folk-blues of his native Mississippi. He was also influenced by popular singers of the day such as Al Jolson and Gene Austin. Rodgers's mature style would blend all these influences and result in a distinctive presentation that redefined country music in the 1930s and 1940s and influenced many of its greatest stars.

When Ralph Peer came to Bristol, Tennessee, in 1927, Rodgers was living in Asheville, North Carolina, working as a detective and singing on local radio. He auditioned as a solo performer and impressed Peer enough to get a Victor recording contract. On his initial session Rodgers did the first in a series of blues yodels, subtitled "T for Texas, T for Tennessee." These songs were essentially traditional black blues verses but with a distinctive difference; between stanzas Rodgers would yodel a brief interlude. It proved to be a hit formula and established Rodgers simultaneously as "The Singing Brakeman" and "America's Blue Yodeler."

Jimmie Rodgers's repertoire and performing style was markedly different from performers such as the Carter Family and others from the southeast. Rodgers sang a wide variety of music, from risqué to religious, humorous to sentimental, all presented with equal ease and authenticity. Unlike the Carter Family's stoic formal style, Rodgers's performances were intimate, informal, and effortless. His shows were almost always solo, just him and his guitar. Though he sometimes posed for publicity photos in a brakeman or cowboy outfit, he most often dressed in the fashionable clothes of the day.

Rodgers's vocal style was characterized by a throaty, reedy quality. The relaxed effect of his vocal performances can be attributed to his blues-derived technique of occasionally sliding between pitches and employing softer pronunciation of his words.

A true mark of the distinctiveness and resilience of Jimmie Rodgers's style is how it holds its own in a variety of musical settings. On many of his recordings, he accompanies himself on guitar. He was a rudimental guitarist, and his instrumental ability is a negligible aspect of his musical greatness. He was accompanied by commercial radio orchestras ("Miss the Mississippi and You"), by trumpet and piano ("Standing on the Corner" with Louis Armstrong and Lillian Hardin Armstrong), and by New Orleans-style jazz bands, such as on his most popular recording, "Waitin' for a Train."
### Listening Guide

"Waitin' for a Train" 4 beats per measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELAPSED TIME</th>
<th>FORM</th>
<th>EVENT DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:00</td>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>Vocal train whistle imitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:06</td>
<td>Verse 1</td>
<td>Trumpet melody (4 measures)</td>
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<tr>
<td>:16</td>
<td>Tag</td>
<td>Vocal (24 measures)</td>
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<td>Instr. verse</td>
<td>Yodel (2 measures)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>Verse 2</td>
<td>Trumpet and clarinet (16 measures)</td>
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<td>2:46</td>
<td>Tag</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:36</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>Yodel (2 measures)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Analysis of "Waitin' for a Train" (SCCCM, 2/9)

This recording was made in Atlanta in October 1928. It features a bowed string bass, Hawaiian slide guitar, guitar, muted trumpet, and clarinet, playing in a relaxed, jazzy, Dixieland style. This type of presentation demonstrates Rodgers's and Peer's tendency toward commercialism, a tendency quite distinct from the more traditional presentation and repertoire of the Carter Family. "Waitin' for a Train" was indeed Rodgers's most popular recording.

This piece begins with Rodgers's vocal imitation of a train whistle, half whistled and half yodeled. The band then enters with the introduction. Note the role and sound of each instrument. The guitar provides the rhythm; the Hawaiian slide guitar provides a fuller sound with slides and sustained chords, "padding" the texture of the band. The muted trumpet and clarinet are reserved for an instrumental section between verses and do not provide padding or fill-ins during the vocal.

The lyric is about being a hobo, wandering along the railroad line. Contrasting with the "God, Mom., and home" lyrics of the Carters, Rodgers portrays himself as a wanderer and a misfit, down on his luck.

Rodgers's vocal style is relaxed and wistful, lazily sliding from one pitch to the next and frequently employing blue notes, demonstrating that he was as much a white rural blues singer as he was a hillbilly singer.

### Chapter Summary

Much of the credit for the commercialization of country music must go to Ralph Peer for realizing the potential for rural southern music. The recording period from Fiddlin' John Carson in Atlanta (1923) to the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers (c. 1928) was a time of discovery for the music industry. It was a time to explore the stylistic parameters for what was then called hillbilly music. As this music grew, there was a gradual shift in repertoire, from traditional vocal and instrumental music and nineteenth-century popular music to newly composed country songs by writers such as Carson Robison and Bob Miller. Northern studio singers, such as Vernon Dalhart, also tried the new style.
Meanwhile, George Hay realized his dream of a radio show featuring rural folk music, first on Chicago's WLS National Barn Dance and Nashville's WSM Grand Ole Opry.

Finally, by the end of the 1920s the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers forged the two distinctive stylistic paths for country music, the former defining the moralistic and traditional southeastern conservative style, the latter defining the more eclectic blues- and pop-oriented southwestern style.

Additional Listening

Refer to footnotes and citations in the body of the text.

Review Questions

1. What was the impact of radio on the early commercialization of country music?
2. What were the events that led Ralph Peer to record hillbilly talent?
3. What were Tin Pan Alley's earliest attempts at country music?
4. What were the two radio barn dances founded by George D. Hay? Where were they located?
5. Who were the two acts discovered by Ralph Peer in Bristol, Tennessee, that defined a conservative southeastern strain and an eclectic southwestern strain of country music?

Notes

1. In the interest of historical accuracy, it should be noted that the first country artist ever to be recorded was "Eck" Robertson (1887–1975), a championship fiddler from Amarillo, Texas. He recorded a traditional fiddle instrumental, "Sallie Gooden," at Victor's New York studio in 1922. The recording was a product of Robertson's own initiative and not a conscious effort by anyone to create a marketable style. That record went virtually unnoticed until years after Carson's recordings, which did lead to the commercialization of country music. "Sallie Gooden" can be heard on SCCCM, 1/1.
2. "Twenty-One Years" was recorded in 1928 by Mac and Bob (SCCCM, 2/2). Another example of a popular prison song is "Birmingham Jail" (SCCCM, 3/5), recorded in 1927 by Darby and Tarlton.
3. Folklorist John Lomax recorded a collection of railroad ballads sung by real railroad workers in the 1930s. They can be found on Railroad Songs and Ballads (LP format, Library of Congress AFS L61). 
4. The other recordings mentioned here can be found on a record set, selected and annotated by Rodgers historian Nolan Porterfield, entitled Jimmie Rodgers, America's Blue Yodeler (LP format, Smithsonian DMM 2-0721).
In 1929 Jimmie Rodgers settled in Kerrville, Texas. He was very proud of his adopted state and was fascinated by the cowboy lore that was associated with it. He performed frequently in Texas, featured western themes in his songs, and occasionally posed for publicity shots in cowboy regalia. His influence on subsequent western singers is undeniable, and he provided the catalyst for a commercial western style in country music.

The American West of the nineteenth century was already prone to a mythical image in the eyes of the popular public. The paintings of Frederic Remington, countless dime novels, and the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill Cody helped to establish this romantic impression among patrons in the more populous eastern states. By the 1910s motion-picture dramas furthered the mythical West with silent movie cowboy stars such as Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, and William S. Hart. Once synchronized sound technology came about, movie cowboys were required to be as quick with a guitar as they were with a six-shooter.

**GENE AUTRY AND THE HOLLYWOOD SINGING COWBOY**

One of the most proficient Jimmie Rodgers imitators was Gene Autry (1907–1998). A native of Tioga, Texas, he was discovered while working in an Oklahoma railroad telegraph office by the famous cowboy humorist and actor Will Rogers. He began recording in 1929 and first appeared on WLS in Chicago in 1930, billing himself as “Oklahoma’s Singing Cowboy.” His acclaim in the Midwest eventually landed him a job in Hollywood, acting and singing in westerns.

Autry began with a small part in the 1934 picture *In Old Santa Fe*; he then went on to star in over 90 movies, establishing himself as “America’s Number One Singing Cowboy.” Now, in addition to radio, live appearances, and records, country music had a new medium in which to present itself. Song themes evolved from “country” to “western.” Country singers routinely dressed in western wear, a practice that is widely practiced today whether or not the singer’s repertoire includes western themes. In fact, some of the most cherished possessions of country artists are the garish western movie costumes custom-designed
As popular music historian Charles T. Brown points out, the movie cowboy’s image went far beyond the character he portrayed; he was a symbol of the model American male. He was clean-cut, wholesome, and virtuous; but he was also virile and always triumphant in battle. Young boys in the 1930s idolized movie cowboys like Autry, and many benefited from the positive image he conveyed. There is no doubt that studio marketing also benefited from this idolatry, with brisk sales of Gene Autry guitars, songbooks, records, and other paraphernalia.

Autry bowed out of the limelight to serve in the military during World War II, but he came back to show business as strong as ever. Apart from western-themed songs, Autry scored an incredible hit with Johnny Marks’s Christmas favorite “Rudolf, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” Autry reluctantly recorded it in 1949 at the end of a session, but it turned out to be his biggest seller. By the 1950s he was still a popular star but not the box-office powerhouse he had once been. America had made the move to television, and so did he. Not only did he appear in television, but he also purchased studios and television and radio stations, and he founded a production company. For the rest of his career he amassed a sizable fortune from these investments.

Another notable change Hollywood brought to the presentation of country music was a conscious effort to smooth the twangy style of more traditional hillybilly music. Hollywood geared its western movie music to appeal to the broadest possible audience and was certainly not interested in preserving or presenting “authentic” cowboy music.1 Autry nurtured a lower vocal pitch and a crooning, relaxed delivery that would give no offense to the urban middle class. The instrumental accompaniment was likewise pastel in tone and texture, with soft guitars, violins, and Hawaiian steel guitar. Autry’s 1941 Hollywood recording of “You Are My Sunshine” (SCCCM, 6/9) is an example of this smooth style.2

Movie westerns also showcased female country artists. Patsy Montana (1914–1996), a singer and fiddler from Arkansas, became the first female country star with her 1935 million seller, “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” (SCCCM, 5/4, CD 1/16). She featured virtuoso yodeling and western themes in her music; and while never reaching the star status of Gene Autry, she did become the role model for many subsequent female country singers.

Another unique musical style that developed in western movies was what could simply be labeled cowboy harmony. The distinctive male harmony approach to western singing can be attributed to the Sons of the Pioneers. This trio consisted of Canadian-born Bob Nolan, Missourian Tim Spencer, and Leonard Slye, born near Cincinnati, Ohio. The group was formed in California in 1934 and featured a smooth style of harmony. Their finely crafted songs included “Cool
“Water” (SCCCM, 5/3, CD 1/19) and “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” (SCCCM, 5/2, CD 1/18), which exploit the romantic image of the western desert. In 1937 Slye left the group to join Republic Pictures, changed his name to Roy Rogers, and went on to rival Gene Autry as America’s most popular singing cowboy.

**Media, Technology, and Their Impact on Western Music**

During the Depression years of the thirties, the motion picture medium had a significant impact on western artists. Meanwhile, there were also significant developments in radio and records. With record sales and production at their lowest point, American Decca was formed from its parent company in England. Under the direction of talent scout David Kapp, much emphasis was given to talent in the Southwest, particularly hillbilly talent. Decca signed now-legendary western stars to fruitful recording contracts and launched Nashville’s recording industry in the 1940s.

Decca also offered a 35 cent record to its public, countering the price of 75 cents commanded by the major labels. Soon the major record companies were offering budget label subsidiaries to compete with Decca, making recordings more accessible to the Depression-weary public. Jukeboxes became common fixtures in public dance facilities during the thirties. Along with cheaper records, the industry was rejuvenated.

Another type of radio station was born in Texas. In the border town of Del Rio, station XER (later XERA) was founded in 1931. By placing the transmitter across the border in Mexico (hence the “X” in the call letters), XERA was exempt from FCC transmission restrictions and cut through the airwaves with over 100,000 watts. Soon other X stations, or border radio stations, were founded, their signals reaching as far away as Canada. They were a powerful vehicle for the exposure of country talent, particularly western country talent, as well as exposure for the many commercial products that sponsored their radio performances.

One other technological achievement is worth noting in the development of western styles: the electric guitar. Experimental electric guitars had been around since the twenties; but they did not appear in country music until Bob Dunn, guitarist with Milton Brown (mentioned later), began using an amplified steel guitar in 1934. Its immediate acoustic predecessor was the Dobro, a guitar with a large metal resonating disk beneath the strings rather than a hole. Once the electric instruments were adopted, they became the defining feature of southwestern country music; the Dobro and other acoustic string instruments remained associated with the more conservative country music of the Southeast.

Due in part to these developments, western music increasingly asserted itself on the country music tradition. The two major styles of western music that emerged during the 1930s were western swing and honky tonk.

**Western Swing**

Western swing is an eclectic dance music that originated in Texas, a state characterized by diverse ethnic traditions, but musical and cultural. As southerners of Anglo-Celtic ancestry migrated westward across the United States, they encountered settlers of other ethnic backgrounds: French Acadians, Germans, Czechs, Slavs, Hispanics, American Indians, and, of course, African-Americans. (The significant historical legacy of black cowboys has been largely overlooked.) The typical western road musician was required to maintain diverse repertoires to cater to the tastes of these various ethnic groups, and it seemed only natural that a musical hybrid should arise in the Southwest.
Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys are pictured on an outdoor stage in Hominy, Oklahoma, in 1940. At this time, western swing band combined full-fledged swing bands with a country fiddle band. Note that the instrumentation includes five wind instruments, two fiddles, piano, banjo, bass, drums, electric lap steel guitar, and electric guitar. Wills is the fiddler in the darker shirt.

The major figure in the development of western swing was Bob Wills (1905–1973). His career and musical background were typical of this Texas musical diversity. Wills was a third-generation hoedown fiddler, possessing a vast repertoire of traditional dance tunes that migrated west with his family. Added to that was Hispanic folk music and the influence of African-American folk blues and jazz. Wills’s biographer, Charles Townsend, said that Wills worked side by side with blacks in the cotton fields, like many poor whites, and knew their folkways and music firsthand. This is evident in Wills’s vocal and instrumental mannerisms. He also listened to a lot of race records and was particularly impressed with vaudeville blues queen Bessie Smith. In fact, his first recording for the Brunswick label, made in Dallas in 1929, included “Gulf Coast Blues,” a cover (which is a remake) of a famous Bessie Smith recording.

In 1931 Wills consciously worked toward forming an urban style of hoedown western music. He formed a band with a jazz rhythm section to provide a danceable beat, hired white blues singer Milton Brown, and began to incorporate some use of jazz improvisation. This band became the Light Crust Doughboys, sponsored by Burrus Mills in Fort Worth. Soon disputes with manager W. Lee O’Daniel led both Milton Brown and Bob Wills to quit the band and form groups of their own.

Milton Brown formed his Musical Brownies in 1932 and continued to rival Wills and his band until a fatal car accident ended his career in 1936. Brown was a fine jazz and blues singer, as his recording of W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” will attest (SCCCM, 6/2, CD 1/12). The Brownies, in fact, recorded rags, blues, and popular numbers; they rarely performed conventional country fare.
Bob Wills moved south to Waco, Texas, and formed the Texas Playboys, the most famous of the western swing bands. The peak years for the group, 1934 to 1942, were spent in Tulsa, Oklahoma, broadcasting over radio station KVOO.

The Light Crust Doughboys, Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies, and the earliest Texas Playboys were string bands. The quintessential hoedown band was comprised of fiddle and guitar; an extra fiddle or banjo may have been added. Western swing instrumentation began to evolve with Milton Brown's band. While remaining a string band, Brown employed fiddlers who could improvise in the jazz style, used jazz-style piano, and was the first to use the electric steel guitar, which was used more like a horn than a chordal backup instrument. Leon McAuliffe, a member of Wills's band, made his contribution to the popularity of the steel guitar in 1936 with his recording of "Steel Guitar Rag" (SCCCM, 6/3, CD 1/21). This became one of the Playboys' most requested numbers and the staple étude learned by all students of the instrument.

As early as 1934, Wills took the next step in western band instrumentation by adding drums and horns to the band. The resulting instrumentation was essentially a Dixieland horn band (trumpet, clarinet, and trombone) combined with a country string band. By 1940 Wills had added enough horns that the group was essentially a swing big band with a country string band. The rhythm section was quite large, including drums, bass, electric rhythm guitar, electric steel guitar, two (sometimes more) fiddles, banjo, piano, and, sometimes, accordion. Though not as polished as northeastern swing bands, Wills's group was extremely versatile. They were able to offer southwestern audiences exactly what they demanded—everything from Dixieland to square-dance music.

**Analysis of "New San Antonio Rose" (SCCCM, 6/8, CD 1/22)**

The real turning point for Bob Wills and western swing was the 1940 recording of "New San Antonio Rose." Wills had written and recorded the tune as an instrumental in 1938, but he added lyrics for this new version. It became a huge national success and brought western swing out of its regional confines. Soon Wills and his band began appearing in movie westerns, adding a cowboy song facet to their repertoire.

This vocal version is made up of three themes, one more than the original instrumental, arranged ABCA. Since this form departs somewhat from the typical verse/chorus format of popular song, in this analysis, the letters A through C will be used to define the different themes of the song.

"New San Antonio Rose" presents the instrumentation and music styles that comprise western swing. The introduction features the horns in a typical swing dance band introduction. The horns continue with a smoother fox-trot rendering of the A and B themes. This opening instrumental omits the C theme and, instead, goes back to the swinging rhythms of the introduction to set up the entrance of the vocal.

Vocalist Tommy Duncan then presents the melody in its entirety. In the A and B themes his vocal line is reinforced by the saxophones in harmony. In the C theme Duncan's vocal melody is doubled by trumpets in close harmony, reminiscent of the trumpet section of a Mexican mariachi band. The last A theme returns to the saxophone background.
The mariachi-style trumpets return to recap the C theme, followed by the saxophones with the A theme, this time without the vocal. The four-measure ending finishes out the arrangement.

Another signature Bob Wills trait to be heard on this recording is Wills's calling out during the course of the performance. Between phrases, or at certain points in the instrumental solos, one might hear Wills call or sing “Take it away, Leon,” “Al Strickland, now,” or just “yee-haw.” By all accounts from his musicians, it was a bit of show business, but mostly Wills’s unbridled enthusiasm during the course of a performance.

World War II brought about the end of an era in western swing. As with most bands at this time, the draft took its toll on the personnel of the Wills group. He reorganized in California in 1943 with a smaller band, essentially returning to a string-band format. Now the electric guitar and electric steel guitar had to compensate for the missing horns. Wills’s string band accomplished this quite adequately. For instance, on a block chord passage Wills would combine fiddle lead, guitar, steel guitar, accordion, and, perhaps, one tenor saxophone to simulate a brass section. This technique would prove influential on early rock-and-roll bands such as Bill Haley and the Comets.

The California ballroom scene began in 1942 when the Venice Pier Ballroom opened to cater to transplanted Oklahomans, who had fled the devastating dust bowl of the 1930s. Western swing soon began to outdraw name swing bands such as Tommy Dorsey’s and Benny Goodman’s. One of the key figures in the California ballrooms was Donnel Clyde “Spade” Cooley (1910–1969), an Oklahoma fiddler who formed a large western swing band in California in 1942. Compared to Wills, Cooley’s band was bigger, more polished, and more of a crossover into popular dance music.

Spade Cooley was the Paul Whiteman of western music. He had as many as 24 musicians, including a full string section and harp, and formal arrangements. His musicians were primarily well-trained note readers, whereas Bob Wills’s musicians often faked arrangements. Also, Cooley’s band was not as reliant on blues and black folk music as Wills’s. While Cooley’s band did not have the unfettered
spontaneity and ebullience of Wills’s, his band did represent the western swing style at its most refined.

**Honky Tonk**

Another strain of western music that emerged in the 1930s was *honky tonk*, so named for the establishments in which the music was heard. During the height of the Depression, the Texas oil boom brought many rural dwellers to remote oil towns in search of work. On the weekends these workers headed to the outskirts of town to drink and dance in the taverns that proliferated after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933.

In this atmosphere the gentle “God, Mom, and home” themes of earlier country music were lost, as were the traditional ways of performing them. Honky tonks were loud places, and people were there to dance; but to do any dancing the music had to be heard above the noise. As with western swing—honky tonk’s sister music—a more insistent dance beat had to be employed, sometimes aided by the piano and, only occasionally, by drums. The electric guitar and steel guitar became distinctive features of honky tonk instrumentation. The former's role was that of lead, or "take-off," guitar, alternating solo verses with the vocal.

Themes in honky tonk lyrics took on the experiences and the sentiments of the patrons. The songs celebrated the party atmosphere of the tonks and the good times to be had, but the primarily fundamentalist upbringing of the performers and the audience added a counterbalance of morality. Self-pity and remorse lay at the heart of most honky tonk songs. This "cry in your beer" approach seemed to offer justification by guilt to those who inhabited honky tonks and an "I told you so" self-righteousness to those who would not have been caught dead in such places.

The first great honky tonk singer was Ernest Tubb (1914–1984). Born in Crisp, Texas, he began his career as a devout Jimmie Rodgers imitator. By 1940 he had signed a contract with Decca Records and recorded his first big hit, “Walking the Floor Over You.” Several years later, he made an appearance on the Grand Ole Opry, serving as a potent representative of the honky tonk style and inspiring many future honky tonk singers. Tubb did not originate the use of amplified take-off guitar, but his widespread appeal influenced many others to adopt it.

**Analysis of “Walking the Floor Over You”**
*(SCCCM, 7/1, CD 1/23)*

The first feature exemplified in this performance is honky tonk country music’s distinctive instrumentation and the role of those instruments. There is no drummer; an acoustic guitarist keeps the rhythm. The prominent instrument is the electrically amplified guitar, sharing equal space in the limelight with Ernest Tubb’s vocal.

The subject matter of “Walking the Floor Over You” foreshadows the scandalous and remorseful cheating and drinking songs of future honky tonk artists. Yet this early in the development of honky tonk (1941), the singer’s emotional situation is not as graphically depicted. Tubb’s vocal presentation is, in fact, rather pleasant and upbeat, regardless of the heartache expressed in the lyric.
The end of the war saw a spate of popular honky tonk singers and the firm establishment of the style. Honky tonk marked the beginning of country music's dealing with the themes of jilted lover and "hanky panky," in retrospect, much like New York cabaret and urban blues singers had done 20 years before. By the late 1940s the darker side of human relationships was more graphically depicted in honky tonk songs. Texan Floyd Tillman wrote and recorded the first great cheating song, "Slipping Around" (SCCCM 10/2, CD 2/11) in 1949. Webb Pierce recorded the first great drinking song in 1953, "There Stands the Glass" (SCCCM 11/1). It was a scandalous lyric that openly endorsed drinking to numb one's heartache, and it was banned on many radio stations.

Honky tonk themes and instrumental styles evolved from the 1930s to the 1950s, as did its audience. Country music fans became increasingly urban and blue collar. They were ready to confront the realism of social ills depicted in honky tonk songs, yet they were tentative in condoning such behavior. This psychological irony sometimes manifested itself in the musical history of the song itself. A case in point: The first big hit for Roy Acuff was "Great Speckled Bird" (SCCCM, 4/7, CD 1/14), a religious number he recorded in 1936. Its melody was used by Hank Thompson for his 1951 honky tonk hit "The Wild Side of Life" (SCCCM, 10/5, CD 2/20) and its sequel "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" (SCCCM, 10/6, CD 2/21), recorded by Kitty Wells in 1952. The combination of a gospel song melody with a remorseful lyric about honky tonk life was a musical manifestation of the moralistic/hedonistic struggle within the psyche of the country music audience.

In the years since its beginning, most of the significant proponents of the raw honky tonk style have been from the Southwest, including Lefty Frizzell, Hank Thompson, Ray Price, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, George Jones, and George Strait. The songs of these and other honky tonk artists have retained their basic character but have not been immune to change over the years. With today's more liberal view of women, many female honky tonk singers have been not only accepted by the public but have flourished along with their male counterparts. Minority groups, in rare instances, have also been accepted in the traditional honky
tonk realm. Several examples of this are black country singer Charlie Pride and Hispanic singers Freddie Fender and Johnny Rodriguez. Increased public frankness on subjects like sex, drugs, and violence has added new and graphic intrigue to honky tonk lyrics.

**The Bakersfield Sound**

The Southwest has also established a couple of music production centers that, while no match for Nashville, have made significant contributions to the country music industry. Migrating Oklahomans in the 1930s and the rising ballroom scene in the 1940s helped to establish the working-class town of Bakersfield, California, as an important country music center from the 1950s to the 1970s. The most significant artists from this country scene were Merle Haggard, born near Bakersfield in 1937, and Buck Owens, a native of Sherman, Texas. While essentially characterized as honky tonk music, a distinctive “California” or “Bakersfield” sound emerged. It was a louder and more electric type of music, heavy on electric guitar and electric steel guitar and on high strident vocals, perhaps sharing more of a kinship with rockabilly or later country rock. Eventually, the burgeoning country scene in Bakersfield and Los Angeles kindled increasing rivalry with Nashville. This led to the establishment of the Academy of Country Music, a West Coast industry cooperative of country music studios, promoters, artists, and publishers.

**Austin and Outlaw Country**

Another important country music scene in the Southwest was Austin, Texas. As state capital and the home of the University of Texas, Austin in the 1970s had a thriving intellectual and highly eclectic music scene. College students who were devotees of urban folk music and rock were caught up in the fierce regional pride of their own native music also. This fostered a club scene, where graduate students and rednecks, rockers and honky tonkers coexisted in harmony. The music that arose from this unlikely bohemian culture was an eclectic mix indeed, ranging from the Carter Family and blues to Bob Dylan and psychedelic rock. The group Asleep at the Wheel settled in Austin in the mid-1970s, combining rock with western swing. Jerry Jeff Walker, a former New York folk artist and the composer of “Mr. Bojangles,” was also an early member of the *redneck rock* scene. The growth of Austin’s music eventually led to the television program *Austin City Limits*, which still airs weekly on public television.

Just as San Francisco spawned a counterculture in rock music in the 1960s, Austin of the 1970s had its own brand of rebellious imagery. It glorified the image of the ruthless western outlaw, the antithesis of the moral giant portrayed by Hollywood westerns. Artists wore black cowboy clothes, long hair and beards, blue jeans and sneakers. Some, such as Ohio native David Allan Coe, had served time in prison, which enhanced their public image rather than being detrimental to it. Coe eventually moved beyond the image of the hell-raising cowboy and opted for a headband and leather biker clothes, a more universal symbol of the outlaw character. The language of some of his recordings was graphic enough to limit their advertising to adult magazines. Even with this image of crude lawlessness, Coe still conveyed sensitivity and savvy as a singer and songwriter. His performance of the ballad “Please Come to Boston” is tender and moving, and his
Waylon and Willie

Waylon Jennings, born in 1937, began his career as the electric bassist for Texas rockabilly artist Buddy Holly. After paying his dues in southwestern bars, Jennings came to the attention of Chet Atkins and RCA, who signed him to a contract in 1965. Their relationship was plagued with conflict; Jennings refused to have his style either pigeonholed or tamed according to Atkins's production standard. He maintained an eclectic repertoire that was always rock-influenced, and it was this independence that eventually gained him superstardom. While he never moved his base of operations to Austin, it was there that he found the most favor. There he could nurture his dark outlaw image, particularly with the 1976 release of his album *Wanted, the Outlaws*. Jennings died in 2002.

Willie Nelson's early success was as a songwriter, not as a performer. He was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1933 and came to Nashville in 1960. He composed country classics such as "Night Life," "Hello Walls," "Crazy," and "Funny How Time Slips Away" (*SCCCM*, 16/7, CD 3/18), but these songs were popularized by other performers. In 1972 he made a calculated move to capture both the honky tonk crowd and the youth counterculture. His earlier fans must have been shocked at the transformation: Nelson let his hair grow, braided it into pigtails, and donned jeans, headband, T-shirt, and sneakers. Among other projects, his duet ventures with fellow Texas outlaw Waylon Jennings proved the most successful. Another highlight in his career was his 1975 album *Red-Headed Stranger*, featuring a plaintive rendition of Fred Rose's song "Blue Eyes Cryin' in the Rain" (*SCCCM*, 16/8). (Songwriter and publisher Fred Rose will be discussed in the next chapter.)

Nelson's performing style is unique and personal. In his Nashville years it proved to be a liability, but ultimately it was his greatest asset. He has a repertoire of great depth, ranging from Tin Pan Alley standards to western swing and honky tonk. His voice is delicate and nasal, colored with a narrow and quick vibrato. Nelson's vocal phrasing is defined by his free rhythmic treatment of the melody that floats over the steady beat of the band. This type of phrasing is com-
mon among jazz singers, but it is most unusual in country music and is probably Nelson's most controversial stylistic feature. While most country bands strive for a full-sounding texture, the texture of Nelson's band is characteristically sparse, and his arrangements are uncomplicated and compatible with his own guitar playing and vocal style.

Nelson has continued to move freely between mainstream celebrity status and premiere western tonker. He has done character acting in motion pictures, sponsored several Farm Aid concerts and other benefits, and helped the careers of stars as diverse as Julio Iglesias. How long stars such as Willie Nelson can manage to keep country music in the limelight of mainstream popular music is a moot point. Whereas country music seems to be fading east of the Mississippi, even in Nashville itself, the devotion of country fans in the West surely will keep the music alive and well for years to come.

**Analysis of “Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother”**

*(Viva Terlingua, CD format, MCA MCAD-919)*

Jerry Jeff Walker is one of the royalty of the 1970s Texas outlaw country scene. Walker, however, is actually a native of New York State (born Ronald Clyde Crosby in 1942). His biggest hit song was “Mr. Bojangles,” though his own 1968 recording paled in sales to the cover by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band in 1971. (It was also a bit hit for cabaret artist Sammy Davis, Jr.)

In the early 1970s Walker moved to the Austin, Texas, area and, in 1973, recorded *Viva Terlingua* in front of a live audience in Luckenbach, Texas, a tiny town immortalized in a Chips Moman and Buddy Emmons song recorded by Waylon Jennings and others. Only a live recording like this can capture the rowdy atmosphere of the style in its time. Walker’s Lost Gonzo Band seems to go out of its way to play up the stomping, honky tonk style, twangy steel guitar, and sloppy, drunken vocal style. The song is a wonderful self-parody of the fist-fighting, beer-slinging redneck, conservative enough to beat up hippies but accountable for little else. The song also turns the traditional angelic mother image of country music on its ear, as does the last verse of David Allen Coe’s “You Never Even Called Me by My Name.”

The recording opens with the sound of the boisterous crowd and an acoustic rhythm guitar. Walker’s vocal enters for the first verse. His sound is folksy and unadorned, almost defiantly careless in its delivery and already capturing the don’t-care attitude of the outlaw country style. The electric bass and drums enter with him. After a few seconds, a harmonica begins playing around Walker’s vocal. As you will hear throughout this and many country recordings, different instruments in the band take turns in this role. It is also notable that using a harmonica in the band adds to the backwoods, Woody Guthrie-type imagery to the band and its music.

As the first chorus comes around, the steel guitar gives a prominent lead-in, the instrument unrepentantly pushing out its whining sound so beloved by country music’s fans and despised by its detractors. Background singers join Walker for the chorus, not so worried about precise harmony as creating the sound of a freewheeling sing-along in a honky tonk. This type of presentation, and probably this song in particular, must surely have inspired Garth Brooks’s “I Got Friends in Low Places” (see Chapter 14).
Listening Guide

“Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother” 4 beats per measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELAPSED TIME</th>
<th>FORM</th>
<th>EVENT DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:00</td>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>Guitar strumming chords alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:06</td>
<td>Verse 1</td>
<td>Vocal, bass, and drums enter; harmonica creeps in later (16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:34</td>
<td>Chorus 1</td>
<td>Background vocalists and steel guitar join Walker (16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:03</td>
<td>Verse 2</td>
<td>Harmonica and piano prominent behind vocal (16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:31</td>
<td>Chorus 2</td>
<td>Similar to previous chorus but more excited and rowdy (16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>Chorus 3</td>
<td>First half guitar solo, second half steel guitar (16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:29</td>
<td>Verse 3</td>
<td>Walker performs in spoken recitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:59</td>
<td>Chorus 4</td>
<td>(16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:27</td>
<td>Chorus 5</td>
<td>(16 measures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:56</td>
<td>Tag</td>
<td>Based on the last four measures of the chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:13</td>
<td>End</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second verse, honky tonk styled piano competes with the harmonica for the role of playing around Walker's vocal. Making the musical texture busier adds to the progressive intensity of the performance. The second chorus responds in kind with a more excited delivery and the sudden presence of a Hammond organ, a sound borrowed more from rock, gospel, and rhythm and blues than country.

Next, Walker turns the song over to the band to feature two instrumental solos. The band uses the chord progression of the 16-measure chorus. The electric guitar plays the first half of the chorus (eight measures), and the steel guitar plays the second half. Walker is inspired enough by the steel guitar to yell out some encouragement. For the last measure of this instrumental chorus, the band hits a short chord and remains silent for four beats, putting a big finish on the song to this point and creating anticipation for Walker's reentry with the next verse.

Walker's last verse is a spoken recitation rather than singing, spelling "M-O-T-H-E-R" and obviously poking fun at an old sentimental song that uses a similar ploy. The background singers sing "ooh" like a church choir, contributing to the false reverence of the verse. The chorus follows, done twice in succession, probably giving the crowd a chance to sing along. The band then plays a "tag," repeating the last portion of the chorus to extend the ending and to signal the end of the performance.

Chapter Summary

The "western" side of country and western started with some of the songs of Jimmie Rodgers and with the advent of the singing movie cowboy. While contrived in their presentation, these songs did manage to turn hillbilly music's focus to the western states and added to the polish of country music performances. Gene Autry brought a sophisticated crooning sound to country vocal styles, and the Sons of the Pioneers established a distinctive cowboy harmony style. Hollywood western musicals also gave female country stars some of their first significant exposure.
Meanwhile, in the 1930s, Decca Records and powerful border radio X stations helped to disseminate country artists in the Southwest. The music demonstrated a diversity and eclecticism that distinguished it from its more conservative southeastern counterpart. These distinguishing elements included the use of jazz, boogie woogie, blues, and electric instruments.

Western swing, pioneered by Bob Wills and others, was a versatile dance music reflecting a number of folk and popular music styles. Honky tonk was another style of dance hall music and one that nurtured the human foibles of its audience.

In the passing years, two regionally distinctive western styles came about: the Bakersfield sound from California, characterized by rockabilly-influenced electric sounds; and Austin, Texas's outlaw country sound, characterized by a blend of 1960s rock, urban folk, and country.

Refer to citations in the footnotes and the body of the text.

Lefty Frizzell, "I Love You a Thousand Ways" (1950) (SCCM, 10/3). Lefty Frizzell was second only to Hank Williams in popularity during the early 1950s. No song could be truer to the woes of honky tonk life, since Frizzell actually wrote the song in jail after a barroom fistfight.

Buck Owens, "Excuse Me (I Think I've Got a Heartache)" (1959) (SCCM, 12/8). This recording is a good example of the "Bakersfield" sound discussed in this chapter. The sound is electronic, with piercing, high singing and edgy steel guitar.

Merle Haggard, "Mama Tried" (1968) (SCCM, 15/9). This is a semiautobiographical song that also features the Bakersfield approach to country music.

George Jones, "The Grand Tour" (1974) (SCCM, 16/4). This honky tonk song describes the anguish of divorce. Jones's subjective performance allows him to be the protagonist of the scene, not just the storyteller.

Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, "Mamas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" (1977) (SCCM, CD 4/10). Nelson and Jennings were the icons of the outlaw country scene in Austin. This song exhibits the typical sixties and seventies image of the cowboy—not as a clean-cut hero, but as a dark social outcast, a free and wandering spirit that ultimately breaks the hearts of all the women he encounters.

Review Questions

1. How did movie westerns affect country music's style and popularity? Was movie cowboy music authentic cowboy songs?
2. What was the impact of Decca Records and border radio on western music?
3. How did the development of electric guitars affect western country styles?
4. How is the ethnic diversity of Texas reflected in the origins of western swing?
5. What was the instrumentation of a typical western swing band?
6. What brought about the rise of the California scene in country music? Who were its main proponents?
7. What was the instrumentation of a typical honky tonk band?
8. What are the characteristics of honky tonk lyrics? What was the atmosphere in the bars and towns that inspired them?

9. Describe the redneck rock or outlaw country that emerged in the Austin, Texas, area.

10. What songs did Willie Nelson pen early in his career for other artists? How did he change his image in the 1970s?

Notes

1. For a sampling of authentic cowboy music, see John Lomax’s anthology Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910) or listen to the Library of Congress recording Cowboy Songs, Ballads, and Cattle Calls (AAFS L28).

2. On the second edition of SCCCCM, “You Are My Sunshine” is performed by Jimmie Davis (CD 1/25), whereas Autry performs “South of the Border” (CD 1/17).