Poetry for the People:
Country Music and American Social Change

Davis Raines and Tricia Walker

Country Music emanated from the American South during the advent of commercial recordings and the rise of radio in America after World War I to become a cultural phenomenon. Traditionally music of the white, Protestant, working-class Southerner, Country remained a relevant genre throughout the twentieth century because its songs documented the lives of its constituents – it addressed their pain, their dreams, struggles, beliefs, and moral dilemmas. The music we now know as Country Music has always reflected the social change experienced by its core audience.

Even the earliest recordings provide evidence of this characteristic. Noted country music scholar, the late Charles K. Wolfe, observed in his essay, “Toward a Contextual Approach to Old Time Music” (1974), that the early “78” phonograph records provided more than just insight into the white Southerner’s folk music; they tell us much about the dialects, folkways, customs, and lifestyles as well. Many records released in this period bear this assertion. Event-songs like “The Wreck of the #9” and “The John T. Scopes Trial” recorded these occurrences, serving as musical news reels, and entertainment for consumers. The Carter Family’s seminal recording, “Single Girl, Married Girl,” is a commentary on the changes the woman experiences after she takes a husband, and seems to lament her lost freedom.

Single Girl, Single Girl – She’s going where she please
Married girl, a married girl – baby on her knees

Jimmie Rodgers, the Singing Brakeman from Meridian, Mississippi, was present, along with the Carters, at the landmark Bristol, Virginia, recording sessions conducted by Ralph Peer for Victor in 1927. These sessions introduced the future Hall of Fame artists to the world. From those sessions came Rodgers’ “The Soldier’s Sweetheart,” a tragic song about a young woman who lost her lover in the Great War. Rodgers later

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recorded songs that looked at southern life into the Great Depression. Songs of the unemployed rambler, like “Hobo’s Meditation” and “Waiting for a Train,” social testimonials like “No Hard Times” and “Gambling Barroom Blues,” commentary on the ravages of tuberculosis in “T.B. Blues,” and the longing for the simple life in the face of increasing urbanization in the sublime “Miss the Mississippi and You” – all give the listener glimpses into life in the American South from the Jazz Age into the great economic crash.

*I’m growing tired of the big city lights
Tired of the glamour and tired of the sight
In all my dreams I am going once more
Back to my home on the old river shore
I am sad and weary, far away from home*

This great crisis yielded many songs to the Country canon that were pure blues – white people playing the twelve bar format and singing lyrics that directly pertained to the hard life they were living. But perhaps the finest document from that period is the Carter Family’s gospel-tinged “No Depression in Heaven,” which has recently become notable again, thanks to the alt-country movement and recordings by Chicago’s Uncle Tupelo, and again by Sheryl Crow.

World War II brought the nation’s focus toward defeating the Axis, and commercial record sales in America, like other luxuries, suffered. However, Country Music’s appeal began to spread during this period; Southern soldiers and sailors were being sent all over the world, and they took their music with them. The eminent Country Music scholar, Bill C. Malone, asserts:

*Just as the war enlarged the scope and magnitude of American life, so did it affect the character and popularity of country music...it would become a national phenomenon during the war...these influences exerted terrific pressure upon country musicians to modify their styles in order to attract a potentially new and larger audience...*

The war years yielded a more sophisticated sound in Country Music. Artists, particularly those from west of the Mississippi, introduced drums and electric guitars to recordings and performance; and the subject matter addressed issues faced by the Southerner in a modern, war-torn world.
Patriotic songs abounded with examples like “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere” and Roy Acuff’s “Smoke on the Water” – “when our army and our navy overtake the enemy” (definitely not the Deep Purple rock anthem of the 1970s). Also, sentimental ballads addressing the soldier’s separation from his loved ones were popular, with tunes like Floyd Tillman’s beautiful “Each Night at Nine” and Gene Sullivan’s “When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again” being exceptionally popular. Perhaps one of the best known songs of the period was one that addressed the heretofore subject of interracial romance – “Filipino Baby,” and another war zone love song, surfacing in the 1950s – “Fraulein.”

Far across deep blue water lived an old German’s daughter
On the banks of the old river Rhine
It was there that I met her but I can’t forget her
She was my pretty Fraulein

America experienced an economic boom after the victory in WW II. There was more disposable income, and record sales skyrocketed. So did the popularity of honky-tonks around the South, casual drinking and dancing establishments where returning veterans could take their ladies to dance. With the ascension of electrified instruments and affordable P.A. gear, Country musicians could be heard against the din of a wild and celebratory crowd. These elements changed the way the music was performed, and consequently, the subject matter as well. Southerners were taking advantage of their newfound mobility to flock to the industrialized cities for better paying jobs in the manufacturing facilities, and the new, faster urban lifestyle placed unfamiliar stress on their psyche and their relationships. These honky-tonks were also places where lonely people of both genders frequented, and opportunities for sex, extramarital in many cases, abounded, along with a conducive environment for alcohol abuse, and a lifestyle in which the newly urbanized Southerner was confronted with many moral dilemmas. Popular country songs of the period reflected the attitude and lifestyle of the postwar Southerner: “Smoke, Smoke, Smoke that Cigarette,” “A Six Pack to Go,” and “Divorce Me C.O.D” are good examples. Kitty Wells became the first female with a country #1 hit with “It Wasn’t God who Made Honky-Tonk Angels.” The subgenre of honky-tonk continues into the present, in small pockets of dance halls and VFW’s across America, especially in the Southwest, where the music of Bob Wills is still king, and the vocation of honky-tonk musician is a proud one; the requirements for technical virtuosity being most demanding.
Into this milieu stepped young Hank Williams, who seemed to be a living, breathing example of the new lifestyle. He sang of drinking, cheating, and squandering money, of profound isolation, of the young rural boy struggling to catch up to the speed of the modern world, all issues familiar to his audience, and his songs were so poetic and appealing (and danceable, an important social aspect of American life in any era); he quickly became an American folk hero.

\[ I \text{ left my home on the rural route} \]
\[ I \text{ told my Pa I's going stepping out} \]
\[ \text{And get the honky-tonk blues}^5 \]

Williams lived the kind of life that his young Southern audience admired. He lived fast, died young and left the rest to the friends and neighbors – to canonize him, make him a martyr, another Southern son gone, a country boy cut down in his youth, trying to please the big money men, his audience, his ex-wife ... trying to live in this fast new world. Hank Williams spawned countless imitators, changed the whole face of Country Music for all time, virtually setting the mold for what a Country star was supposed to look like, to sing like, and especially to write like. The old sentimental songs of home and the jam-up and honey hokum songs would no longer cut it for Americans who had been around the world. Williams demonstrated an acute insight into the human condition, and wrote about it in simple, poetic terms and in a language his audience understood. Hank sang about us, about our heartaches, our fears, our flaws, our love of celebration and self-medication and sex. And he remains the most high saint of the genre. “I just hold the pen,” Hank said, “and God does the rest.”

\[ \text{Like a bird that's lost its mate in flight} \]
\[ I \text{'m alone and oh, so blue tonight} \]
\[ \text{Like a piece driftwood on the sea} \]
\[ \text{May you never be alone like me}^6 \]

In the wake of Williams’ death in 1953, Americans began to notice a new musical style, one that combined the Country/Western (as it was being called, a salute to the significance of Texans like Ernest Tubb and Bob Wills), with the Rhythm and Blues music of African Americans, who had contributed a great deal to the war effort, and were looking to claim a rightful and honorable place in society. The new music mixed all these
styles; it was a rebellious sound with an accent on the beat. It sounded like jet planes and V-8 engines, not Pa’s old Model T Ford puttering down the unpaved roads. It appealed to the young people, especially that young Southern white boy hanging around the gas station, waiting for Saturday night. A nineteen-year-old truck driver from Memphis named Elvis Presley would become the nucleus of the phenomenon, but the issue of race and social justice would fuel what was, by default, being called Rock & Roll. Nashville, the country music capital, recoiled in horror, and then went to work. Rather than tackle the race issue, Nashville released music that stayed to a limited field of view, in order to retain their conservative white buying public. Infidelity and alcoholism were acceptable topics, as they had been before, and anything “aw shucks” funny, like “Dang Me,” or “Girl on the Billboard,” was fine. Murder was still fair territory, as was suicide. But there would be no mention of politics, unless it was purely patriotic, “Go America!” or the like, no portrayal of racial differences outside a traditional “Old Uncle” stereotype, and no variation on the old southern Protestant view of God and His mercy on poor sinners.

The songs were written about countless variations on love and its many manifestations; and for first time, they were being written by young composers who had come to Nashville purely to get their work recorded – professional songwriters, and like New York’s Tin Pan Alley, Nashville began to house a cadre of folks who wrote songs every day, for the purpose of commercial release. They were brilliant in their ability to continuously churn out new material that was palatable to the public – songs that were invariably about male/female love, but placed into settings that were contemporary and familiar to the audience – timeless lyrics set against lush string arrangements and backing vocal choruses, rather than fiddle and banjo. “It wasn’t real country, but it was pretty Pop. And it sold a lot of records,” said Chet Atkins, who along with Owen Bradley, was the chief architect of what became known as the Nashville Sound. Rather than being swallowed up by Rock & Roll, the Nashville Sound brought Country Music into its greatest era, years that would see the phenomenon gain worldwide recognition. And it was all based around the songs, tunes that are still known everywhere today, but not many with any real social significance. Although there are exceptions – Danny Dill and Mel Tillis’ “Detroit City,” provides a close-up of the Southerner’s migration to the promise of the Motor City’s factories and affluence, only to find misery and homesickness; Loretta Lynn’s audacious “The Pill,” and Roger Miller’s commentary on rising divorce rates in “Husbands and Wives.” Country musicians, as Malone (1985) notes, “adapted the sounds to fit
the tastes of popular music devotees who refused to accept the traditional country styles,” and in doing so, had “made country music a billion-dollar industry and completely ‘revolutionized’ the popular music world.”

This “revolution” brought increasing attention to Nashville. By the late 1960s, the city would see an influx of ambitious young poets coming to Music City, children of radio and TV, songwriters who were just as hip to Dylan as they were to Hank Williams. Their arrival and subsequent ascent took Nashville away from the conservative, sparse verse of the “Sound,” and introduced intricate, surreal lyrics to the Country charts, ushering in an era that its laureate, Kris Kristofferson, describes as, “like Paris in the 1920’s. There was so much in the air.”

Kristofferson was educated in the works of the Romantics, could quote Blake and Byron and Keats, had consumed the Dylan catalog and was trying to be Hank Williams, living the ‘life boheme’ on Music Row. He wrote achingly simple songs that contained meaning and feeling, with literary references and poetry theretofore without precedent in Country Music. His songs, many times, involved sex – real, physical sex, not some veiled suggestion, and he wrote in terms that appealed to Americans who had already seen Kennedy killed on TV, as well as the tragedy of Vietnam, and were long past Frankie and Annette’s squeaky-clean Beach Party morality. “He took Country out of the sitting room and into the bedroom,” said Kristofferson’s longtime friend, Willie Nelson.

One need only listen to “Help Me Make It Through the Night” to realize that it is a different kind of Country love song than what the good folks were accustomed.

He wrote of being stoned, not drunk, but stoned – a term familiar to the young people, whose tastes had also ventured beyond Country’s traditional alcohol appetite.

He sang about losers and prophets and street people and good old boys and girls and wrote love poems of great beauty.

*I have seen the morning burning golden on the mountain in the sky
Aching with the feeling of the freedom of the eagle as she flies*

Along with Kristofferson, gifted writers like Mickey Newbury, Johnny Darrell, and a group of Texans that included Guy Clark, Billy Joe Shaver and Rodney Crowell began to filter into Nashville in the 1970s, writing songs that were outside the old “formula” tunes that had built Music City. Johnny Cash had opened the door with his recordings of his own “Man in Black” and Peter LaFarge’s masterwork “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” both songs protesting social injustice, and Merle Haggard had
written “Irma Jackson,” about a white man’s desire for a black woman. These were songs of a new generation, and the burgeoning Outlaw Movement became another musical revolution, one that celebrated a lifestyle that mixed redneck hoorwining with a liberal, hippie political view and an overriding focus on personal freedom. The “New” South was rising, and its young people were sounding off in a loud and defiant voice through this new form of Country Music. People who had grown up on Rock & Roll were suddenly turned on to the music of these free-spirited poets. The songs they turned out became the foundation for the music that would fuel the Outlaw Movement, beginning around mid-1970. The lyrics addressed a variety of previously unexplored topics – Shaver’s “Black Rose,” a look at interracial love, Newbury’s “Ramblin’ Blues” – a veritable Arthur Miller play in which a “typical” American guy ponders his boring life and marriage and weighs the merits of abandoning it all; Hank Williams Junior’s continual references to the pleasures of marijuana, guns, and anonymous sex in his rowdy “new” music; Lee Clayton’s sensuous “If You Can Touch Her At All,” in which the singer’s lover “insists (he) not watch her undress, or watch her watch (him).” The music of the Outlaw Movement paid more than passing homage to Country Tradition, but it embraced Rock sensibilities, featuring a strong beat with a heavy bottom and prominent electric guitar. Whatever accompaniment the songs were cloaked in, the period from 1967 through 1985 provided Country Music with the richest, most accomplished lyrical output in its storied history.

As Country Music moved closer to the twenty-first century, it saw the rise of many important artists who would take the music to previously inconceivable commercial records. Garth Brooks would outsell The Beatles, and Shania Twain, Alan Jackson, and Toby Keith would routinely top the Billboard Top 200 Albums chart. No longer would Country be the provincial, small market music of the American Southerner. Today, the music is associated with the entire of Middle America, seemingly a nation of suburban homogeneity, and as a result, it has been “dumbed down” to appeal to the greatest audience. It appears, that the great poetry of the 1960s and 1970s would have a hard time getting recorded in Nashville today. Bill C. Malone, writing in 1984, attests, “The Country-Pop emphasis nonetheless shows no sign of diminution, and the country side of the equation grows increasingly dim.” One listen to today’s Country radio will bear this assertion. But there are some socially relevant songs that have appeared in recent years, notably Alan Jackson’s post-9/11 paean, “Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning,”

Regardless of the direction Country Music may take in the future, its existence has always been based on its audience’s ability to relate to the message. This characteristic that gave rise to the Country Music genre early in the twentieth century has been sustained for some 85-plus years and is crucial for Country’s continued health. Country Music, to continue to be referred to as such, must always stay “in touch” with the nation, for the very term “Country” no longer means the rural South as much as it means the entire United States. No matter; Country Music will continue in some form or another. It has always been, and should remain, poetry for the people.

NOTES

1 The Carter Family (1927).
2 Bill Halley (1932).
4 Lawton Williams (1957).
5 Hank Williams (1952).
6 Hank Williams (1951).
8 Joyce (1993).
9 Ibid.
10 Kris Kristofferson (1973).

PUBLISHED WORKS CITED


Raines and Walker discuss the broad sweep of American country music in their book. The period most relevant to our current purposes is the post-World War II period. How do they characterize country music in the late-forties and fifties?

Raines and Walker note that counter music "must always stay in touch with its audience." In the post-World War II years, a large part of that audience was white, southern working-class people. What do the country songs listed on the syllabus reveal about the songs they liked and experienced after the war?


How do songs like Merle Travis' "Divorce Me C.O.D." (1946) relate to Raines and Walker's discussion of Southern, white, working-class mobility after World War II and the honky tonk on page 46?