

An Unauthorized History of Country Music

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



Origins

No one really knows for sure where country music originated. However, some rural intellectuals opine that it is music from the hills of rural America. Less xenophobic researchers claim, however, that it may have originated in the mountains of France where a goat herder named Guilliame (French for William) composed love songs to his goat; hence, the term "hillbilly."

Regardless of where the music originated, first traces of what we now call country music first appear in colonial records of North Carolina. Country music historian, Wallace Thudpucker, writes:

"Backcountry people of this area would congregate monthly in barns where they would dance and sing to stringed instruments in a community celebration of joy and often courtship. They were the only means for young men to meet young women. Of course, in these isolated communities, these celebrations were also known as family reunions."

Growth in Early America

Some historians say that country music did not begin to grow until the expansion of slavery in the Old South. The yearning for freedom and deep spirituality growing from the plantation experience as hillbillies toiled in the field under the cruel lash of their masters can be heard today in many country songs. There is some controversy and dispute on the foregoing, however, as some claim this all has to do with Negro spirituals. Others, like Charlie Pride and Darius Rucker would disagree.

Country Music Comes of Age

The Great Depression and migration of farm workers brought with it a surge in country music in America. As "Okies" flocked to California's central valley, for example, they brought their foot-stomping, string-based celebration of poverty, degradation and misery to a previously contented state. Their legacy of Bakersfield and the unabashed "aw shucks" demeanor of Buck Owens are the main reasons that travelers on California Freeway 99 would rather stop in Castaic.

Back east, however, there was a remarkable commercial awakening of country music as the now world-famous Grand Ole Opry began its uninterrupted rise to fame to become the Mecca for country music. Stars like Roy Acuff, Grandpa Jones, Minnie Pearl and the raucous comedian musicians, Homer and Jethro, broadcast their Saturday night jamborees with the gusto and quaintness that would embarrass even Garrison Keeler.

But the 1930's version of the Grand Ole Opry underwent a hiatus during the height of the Depression when the cast was recruited en masse to participate in a WPA coast-to-coast bucket brigade with the goal of emptying the Atlantic into the Pacific. Rumor was that Franklin D. Roosevelt despised country music and that this was just another New Deal make-work project.

Country Music Goes Mainstream

From the 1960s on through the 1980s country music began to go mainstream. The early resurgence was mostly due to the invention of the leisure suit and women's hairspray strong enough to support the bouffant coifs of Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton and Tammy Wynette. Who can forget George Jones and Porter Wagoner in their bell-bottomed leisure suits and meticulous hair cautioning the audience not to smoke during Tammy's performance? (The fear was igniting the hair spray.)

Mainstream entertainment was not long in picking up on the rise in popularity in country music. Shows such as Green Acres, Hee Haw, and the Dukes of Hazzard were definitely inspired by country music. Even today, those classics are serving America.

Rumors on the web are that reruns of Hee Haw have been turned over to federal authorities at Guantanamo Bay Cuba. Suspected terrorist detainees are offered the choice of coercion by the waterboard or watching back-to-back episodes of Hee Haw featuring Junior Samples stumbling through his cue cards. Most terrorists choose waterboarding.

Country Music Today

Today country music is as robust and innovative as ever. It is far more sophisticated but still has lost none of its appeal to the basic emotions that make us human. Topping the charts recently is a wonderful love song by Rascal Flatts about lost love and a broken heart, appropriately titled, "Honey you just sorta' stomped on my aorta."

However, and sad to say, gone are the old country spirituals that survived from the Underground Railroad that shepherded Pride and Rucker's ancestors to freedom. Songs like "Orange Blossom Special" remind us of our roots as Faith Hill and Hank Williams, Jr., once sounded the clarion call for Football Night in America. Everyone hoped that the African-American President, Barack Obama would lead a resurgence in country music similar to Arthur Haley's "Roots." Sadly, President Obama opted for rap.

One last point

Some may wonder whether Kentucky Blue Grass music qualifies as country music. Glen Campbell was once asked this question and replied, "Naw. You have to be sober to enjoy Blue Grass, and Blue Grass is mostly for white people."