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Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly¹

COUNTRY-WESTERN MUSIC is currently one of the most important facets of the entertainment industry. It owes its status and respect largely to financial success, like most of the popular arts of America. Indeed, to call country-western music simply one form of American popular music is to make but one of the myriad and apparently contradictory statements that have been made about its origins, development, function, and significance. The history of this music and our attitudes toward it reflect the contradictions in the American character; that is, in the character of the country-western audience, the urban hillbilly.

The dichotomy in the term "urban hillbilly" expresses both the polarization of city and country and the accommodation of values represented in the hybridization of country-western music. I use the word "hillbilly" in all of its connotations—including Appalachian, southern, and backwoods or country—for they represent but degrees of the same concept and culture, and the different shades of meaning account for much that seems contradictory about the music and its history. Thus my topic cannot be narrowly concerned with migrants from the southern mountains to the northern metropolis; and, while it deals largely with the industrialization and urbanization of the southern regions, it is concerned ultimately with the urbanization of the United States. The South in general and the Appalachians and Ozarks in particular entered the game late, after their frontier folkways had developed and solidified for a longer period than elsewhere in the country. The shock of urbanization, therefore, was greater and the reaction more extreme.

The music growing out of the urbanization of the South was based on a number of traditions, many of them folk and regional, which were able to interact under a minimum of the standardizing influences exerted by the commercial music business. Yet for more than three decades country-western music has been intimately connected with the media of commercial entertainment. For these reasons it is, indeed, a laboratory for the study of some aspects of the American

¹ This paper was accompanied by the playing of a sound tape containing musical illustrations. The opening "theme" was "Detroit City," Bobby Bare, RCA Victor 8183 (1957). Subsequent footnotes will cite recordings, portions of which were played to illustrate points made in the paper.

character, particularly those related to the urbanization of the rural folkways. Because of the late collection and study of American folklore and because of limitations in scholarly outlook, conclusions concerning the early history and development of folk music in the United States are in many respects conjectural. Too often we must reconstruct the development by analysis of the very materials we need to understand in order to explain the development. We may conclude, however, that the early migration of British folk music to the United States was relatively uniform, but that by the end of the eighteenth century the North was receiving newer material and newer styles than the South and was under pressure to conform to emerging urban "popular" styles and to accept the products of the growing urban commercial entertainment industry. The South, on the other hand, tended to preserve and develop the older styles and to create its own materials because of its isolation from urban music. Consequently northern folk music eroded away; either it was lost completely, or it remained in vertical, family traditions, while performance styles more and more approximated urban norms—with the exception of certain pockets of geographical or occupational isolation.

In spite of oversimplification, this summary is broadly accurate. But oversimplification in this case can lead to misunderstanding. It neglects almost totally the interrelation of folk and popular music in the North, a development generally neglected in American folk and cultural studies. More important, it misrepresents the kind of isolation that operated in the South and the Southern Appalachians. To use the Appalachians as the extreme example, our summary perpetuates the notion that settlers flocked into the valleys and coves and then got stuck there. It would be more accurate to note that the settlers not only went where they did because they wanted to go but stayed there because they wanted to stay. They could have left. Many of them did, and many of them returned. By and large, the inhabitants of Appalachia were subjected neither to total geographical isolation nor to totally involuntary cultural isolation. That is to say, their geographical and industrial position permitted them to develop a degree of cultural isolation but did not prevent contact with elements of the dominant and developing American culture; their position made it possible for them to accept, reject, or modify many of its elements.

Thus, by the middle of the nineteenth century the South—approximately the area below Route 40—had preserved and developed a frontier agrarian culture. This culture was not uniform in all regions, no more than it was uniform within any smaller area or community. The regional differences in the culture are related to various musical styles and materials in early hillbilly music. But there was a uniformity in culture that was in turn reflected in music of the folk. The culture valued independence, self-sufficiency, honor, and loyalty (particularly to kin). The family was the economic and social unit, and children were economically profitable. The economy depended primarily on subsistence agriculture. Though the culture was work-oriented, life was attuned to natural rhythms, and leisure existed for traditional noneconomic pursuits. The frontier penchant for drink, violence, and rebellion was complemented by an evangelical religion dominated by the Old Testament. A rigid, patriarchal morality was accompanied by a deep drive for individualistic expression. Indeed, the society was one of extremes: so-

briety and drunkenness, piety and hellraising, daily stoicism and orgiastic religious revivals.

One makes statements about the folk music of this culture with extreme caution. The secular musical tradition was almost completely domestic, performed by nonprofessionals. The repertory included both Old World and native American materials, though it is not possible to demonstrate when some of the latter entered the tradition. Few old ballads native to the area have survived. Performance, excepting shaped-note singing, was monophonic; melodies were largely modal, sung with considerable ornamentation and rhythmic freedom. The only instrument in wide use was the fiddle, and probably only for frolic music. The attitude toward secular music in general and the fiddle in particular varied from complete toleration to total rejection on religious grounds. But there was a strong, conservative tradition with ancient roots.²

A series of cultural shocks and alterations began with the Civil War. Of course the music and the cultural tradition of which it was a part had not been completely static, even in deepest back country, but change now became increasingly rapid. We can date economic changes, we can date song texts, but we cannot date changes in musical styles or even the introduction of musical instruments during this time. For example, the banjo and the Ethiopian minstrel songs were a staple of the urban tradition by 1850; yet we do not know when the southern white folk musician adopted them. What we do know is that by the end of the century they had become a vital part of the tradition. What we can do is recognize influences that were gradual, and influences that were resisted. We can summarize them as urbanization.

The war, as was the case with other American wars to follow, brought rural men into urban environments and men of different cultural regions into contact. After the war a pattern of immigration and emigration began. Northern entrepreneurs and technicians entered to exploit the South. Southern youths were leaving the area—largely for the West—but they were returning as well. Railroads furthered communication; in their very construction they introduced new cultural (including musical) influences. Logging, mining, and manufacturing plants were developed, altering the economy and the face of the South, without fundamentally changing the value system of its folk. It is in this atmosphere that hill-billy music developed and has continued to develop.

Listen to Bradley Kincaid, speaking as a successful professional performer in 1930 of "mountain songs" on radio and phonograph recordings.

There is a practice among recording companies, and those who are inclined to speak slightly of the mountain songs, to call them Hilly Billy songs. When they say Hilly Billy songs they generally mean bum songs and jail songs such as are often sung in lumber camps and among railroad gangs. Such songs are not characteristic of mountain songs, and I hope with this brief explanation you will come to distinguish between these fine old folk songs of the mountains and the so-called Hilly Billy songs.³

Bradley Kincaid was a product of the settlement-school tradition, which was seek-

² "Johnny and Willie" (Child 49), Jim Bowles, Rock Bridge, Kentucky, recorded 29 August 1959 by D. K. Wilgus and Lynwood Montell; Western Kentucky Folklore Archive, UCLA.

³ *Favorite Mountain Ballads and Old-Time Songs*, Book 3 (Chicago, 1930), 6.

ing to combat many of the effects of industrialization and is somewhat to blame for the paucity of information concerning various forms of music in the mountains in the early part of the twentieth century. But "mountain songs versus Hilly Billy songs" expresses the polarity between "mountain white" (the staunch Anglo-Saxon conservator of our ancestral rural values) and "hillbilly" (the crude carrier of filthy backwoods customs). "Mountain song" was of course but one of the terms (others were "Old Time," "Southern," "Dixie") used by recording companies in the 1920s to characterize their materials aimed at the white country audience. Archie Green has traced the term "hillbilly music" to an almost chance remark made at a 1925 recording session.⁴ But the name certainly caught on because of its pejorative nature, and it is now rejected by the music industry for the same reason.

At any rate Kincaid was partially correct in assessing the sources of development of the newer musical tradition. Railroad camps in particular were important in the contact of the older white folk tradition with Negro work and social songs, as well as with all sorts of material carried by migrant workers. There were countless other influences and points of contact. Loggers brought in music; young natives rafted logs to cities and brought back music. The developing Negro tradition was available at many points—the rivers, the fields, the "Black Bottoms" of southern cities. We must not fail to note the influence of instrumentally dominated gospel song, which eroded much of the style of earlier religious music and tremendously influenced secular song. Urban popular song could be heard not only on visits to the city and through casual contact but from circuses and traveling troupes of entertainers. By approximately the end of the century, folk performers themselves were a part of the itinerant show business.

The tradition of wandering minstrel and ballad hawker is an old one, and the peddler of broadside ballads still operated in northern cities in the 1880s. The extent to which the wandering ballad singer of the South is a part of a continuing tradition is difficult to determine. We have nineteenth-century southern broadsides and songsters but precious little evidence of itinerant performers. When we do hear of the professional ballad singer, he is almost invariably included among the halt and the blind, to whom such an occupation was an economic necessity, a fact illustrating the frontier attitude toward musical entertainment. A number of early hillbilly performers belong in this category: Ernest Thompson, Blind Alfred Reed, Lester McFarland and Robert A. Gardner ("Mac and Bob"), and "Peg" Moreland. By 1909 Blind Dick Burnett of Monticello, Kentucky, was touring the South from Florida to Ohio, entertaining at fairs and school houses, selling his broadsides and songbooks, and staging fiddle contests. The fiddle convention or contest was not his invention, however, nor were all the "banjo minstrels" blind. The traveling medicine shows began to employ folk performers as part of their entertainment, and this encouraged youths to emulate them. Doctor Howard Hopkins—later a hillbilly performer in Chicago and elsewhere—recalls being entranced as a boy in Harlan County, Kentucky, with the performances of Dakota Jack's Medicine Show, which he joined later.

Thus there was a tradition of hillbilly musicians—professional performers of

⁴ "Hillbilly Music, Source and Symbol," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* 78 (1965), 204 ff.

material directed to a white folk audience—prior to World War I, the next shock and crisis of culture contact. For we must recognize that many of the early musicians in the commercialized tradition had not spent all their lives in isolated cabins so far back in the hills it took ten cents to send them a postcard. They had worked on the railroads; they had worked in the mills of the South, the oil fields of the West, the industries of the North; they had served in the Spanish-American War and in World War I. They were musicians looking for audiences, paying audiences, an important point in the process of urbanization. The acceptance of music as a career for a healthy adult—a violation of folk taboo—is but one of the tensions of the urban hillbilly.

Phonograph records and radio did not invent hillbilly music, but without them the tradition might have withered. The wedding was inevitable. We tend to emphasize phonograph recordings, mainly because they are surviving artifacts by which we can assess musical developments. But we have to recognize that, despite their importance in the spread and development of hillbilly music, phonograph recordings rank third chronologically among the media bearing the tradition and that their permanence causes us to underrate the other media. Professional country musicians performed first of all before live audiences. Even before the advent of radio some had moved beyond the medicine show, the school house, and the county fair to the vaudeville circuit—notably Uncle Dave Macon and the Weaver Brothers and Elviry. Except for a few early recordings of no historical significance in the development of the tradition, radio was an exploitative device before the commercial recording industry became a medium for the distribution of country performances. The tie-in of radio, phonograph, and personal appearances simply grew—as much through the efforts of the musicians as through the machinations of the media executives. Not that the musicians were not in many cases “used” by the executives. Unsophisticated performers realized pittances for properties of great value (for example, Andrew Jenkins), while others (for example, Jimmie Rodgers) became wealthy in a brief period. The point, however, is that the musicians were in many cases seeking exposure in the commercial media, particularly as an adjunct to personal-appearance fees.

It was no accident that the recordings of Eck Robertson and Henry Whitter in 1922–1923 were at the insistence of the artists, nor was it any accident that they were not exploited immediately by the Victor and Okeh companies.⁵ It was no accident that Whitter came from a southern mill area and that a southern city like Atlanta was the cradle of commercial hillbilly recording. It was no accident that Ralph Peer of Okeh was in Atlanta in 1923, to be almost coerced into recording Fiddlin’ John Carson on the first successful hillbilly disc. The exact places and circumstances may have been accidental, but the historical drama seems inevitable. Peer was looking for local talent to bolster the phonograph industry in the face of the looming competition of radio. He had already pioneered in the recording of Negro performers for the Negro trade. If he needed to be persuaded that the “pluperfect awful” performance of Carson would sell and that the “wool hat” audience would buy, he lost no time in being convinced and in following up

⁵ “Wreck of the Southern Old 97” (Laws G2), Henry Whitter, Okeh 40015 (1923; released 1924).

the initial success. And the talent was ready and willing. The "Golden Age" of hillbilly music had begun.

The subsequent history of hillbilly music prior to 1941 cannot be neatly summarized nor really evaluated with any assurance. Even to sketch in its broad aspects is difficult. Too much of the information stems from the statements, activities, and opinions of recording and radio executives, and it is a proven fact that they were groping in the dark, did not know what they had, and were themselves operating under urban prejudices despite their financial stake in rural music. We do, however, have more information than we can summarize here.

After the success of hillbilly record sales, the recording industry began a large-scale search for regional talent, not only race (Negro) and hillbilly (white Anglo), but Cajun (Louisiana Acadian), Mexican, and other "ethnic" musics as well. They had discovered regional traditions and regional audiences, and now faced the problem of regional demand and sales. Consequently, they were torn between the necessity of satisfying these special demands and the hopes of finding an economical way of satisfying all regions with a single product. As we shall see, both aims were pursued until the second was almost completely successful, but we might question just how accurate the "regional" approach was as far as southern white music was concerned.

We have access to no regional sales figures for the period. We know that the recording companies did restrict the release of recordings by region and that apparently they did not exploit hillbilly recordings in the North (as they did in the South) by inviting the audience into a building, playing them recordings, asking which they liked, and selling them on the spot. We know there was a northern market for the music. The first successful radio barn dance program was established on WLS in Chicago in 1924 with a strong nucleus of Kentucky hill talent. All of the audience could not have been transplanted southerners or people from southern Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois. Much later, when certain types of hillbilly recordings were not available even from jobbers in the North except on special order, they were blaring from tavern juke boxes in the metropolitan North, and comparable records were selling in northern dime stores. Although other facts as well prevent our complete acceptance of the regional approach and the judgment of media executives based on it, we must admit that the early fare of WLS was "bland" compared with many of the southern recordings and that the few national hits in the 1920s were not strictly "southern." At any rate, we can establish that there was in hillbilly music an essence of wide rural appeal, even in the North where expressed urban opinion was contemptuous.

Early hillbilly music was strongly based in the country string band, frolic, and banjo-minstrel tradition, though the recording companies sampled almost everything available, even the Sacred Harp tradition (though not the oldest unaccompanied styles of secular singing). There was no stylistic uniformity, though to the outsider it seemed so. Instrumental styles ranged from simple to relatively complex, from self-taught guitar strums to somewhat complex banjo styles. Instruments had become available through urban contacts and mail order houses, but instrumental groups tended to be small. The fiddle played a lead role, although

there were many solo performances with guitar or banjo.⁶ The instruments used either were cast-offs from urban culture or were played in an unorthodox non-urban fashion. But we should note the criteria involved were not mystical; instruments were chosen that were available, portable, inexpensive, and relatively easy to adapt to traditional melodies and to each other. Because much early recording was done on location, there was little outside interference with instrumentation and style. Studio accompanists were added in exceptional cases, but it is notable that city imitators of the style, who sought and sometimes gained mass sales, cultivated the simplest elements in rural music and avoided anything suggesting urban refinement, although they seldom were able to avoid dynamics and "expressiveness." The "classic" approach, restrained and austere, was one of the most typical elements of hillbilly tradition represented on early recordings, which were largely from the Southeast. It perpetuated older tradition and reflected a continuing cultural value.

The cultural conservatism that reacts to changing conditions by adapting a selection of new materials into old patterns is demonstrated in the musical repertory, which was largely traditional. Tunes in older styles were simplified when characteristics of the new instruments demanded modification, but their essential structure remained, and older tunes were sometimes made the vehicles for texts borrowed from urban sources. No simple characterization can be made of the repertory, for it drew on many sources. It might be said that in some respects it corresponds to the polarization of the culture: orgiastic frolic tunes, low-down blues, and damn-fool ditties versus tragic ballads, lacrimose lyrics, and other-worldly sacred songs. But pervading the entire range is an attitude of seriousness, sincerity, and reality. This attitude survived and palliated the ultimate professionalism of the hillbilly musician. Songs had to be meaningful, in this sense real. I think this conclusion can be applied rather generally to songs retained from the older repertory and those borrowed from other sources. Largely missing from the hillbilly song bag are the older English and Scottish popular ballads, despite the contention that their themes are universal. Though the matter is difficult of proof and there are alternate explanations, I feel that the ballads rejected no longer had a ring of reality and "truth" to the singers and listeners of a culture in transition. This conclusion may seem ridiculous when one considers the preposterous plots of other ballads and the "unreal" and maudlin sentimentality of hillbilly standards. But if one can discard urban sensibilities and consider the hillbilly tradition and the responses of performers and audience, the conclusion cannot be rejected out of hand. Songs of wrecks, pathetic deaths, murdered girls, orphaned children, crumbling cabins, and weeping willows represented truth and reality—all the more perhaps because their attitudes as expressed in the language was foreign to the older tradition. The "hillbilly" culture was selecting and assimilating what it could, in ways least destructive of folk values. Thus, from nineteenth-century popular song it selected those with themes that did not in essence differ from its older songs. The lack of "austerity" in the texts was an acceptable novelty (though it was not far removed from the style of the English

⁶ "Sal Let Me Chaw Your Rosin Some," Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers, Columbia 15267-D (1928).

"vulgar" ballad) and indeed served as a release from cultural tensions. The sentimentality of the texts, and many of the tunes, was overcome at first by the "objectivity" of performance style. We can observe how, with further acculturation, even this objectivity withers away.

The point can be further underlined by noting the attempts of the commercial recording industry to serve and exploit the musical tastes it had discovered. The industry executives sought to standardize their product and to develop new material for sale. They turned for material to urban composers with a folk background (for example, Carson J. Robison and Bob Miller) and folk composers whom they could commission (Andrew Jenkins). The most important productions were what they termed "tragedies" or "event" songs—largely factual, sentimental, and moralistic. Their success can be measured by record sales and by their occurrence in standard collections of folksong made since that time. For the performance of these songs and others with a greater background in folk tradition, the executives turned to urban performers with enough folk background to simulate what the executives felt to be the essence of rural performance ("Vernon Dalhart" [Marion Try Slaughter] and Frank Luther [Crow]). These recordings in the late 1920s generally sold more widely than the performances of authentic hillbillies. The songs and the performances may strike us as often tongue-in-cheek, but many of the songs found wide acceptance. The performance style did not; its real virtue was to convey the lyrics and music most intelligibly to various regions.⁷ In point of fact, deliberate urban spoofs such as "They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree" also entered the hillbilly repertory, partially for reasons already outlined, but also—it must be added—because such spoofs are not alien to the in-group humor of the rural folk.

The problem of accommodating various regional styles was not solved successfully until recent years, but in 1927 Victor discovered almost simultaneously the Carter family and Jimmie Rodgers, rural performers whose performances appealed widely, at least in the South, and who stand for two interrelated streams of hillbilly tradition. Despite the fact that they shared material and utilized comparable sources and related professional techniques, the Carter family represents the domestic tradition of performance and song-making and warm, intimate family values (though A. P. and Sarah were divorced during most of their professional career);⁸ while Rodgers represents the lone wanderer, the rounder, the "poor boy, long way from home" among the pitfalls of society.⁹ Although Rodgers purveyed much sentimental, homey material and the Carter family drew on Negro tradition and performed blues, the distinction is valid. At the cost of oversimplification it can be said that the Carters epitomize the "country" tradition of the Southeast, while Rodgers at least prefigures the "western" tradition of the Southwest, now dominant in commercial country music. The distinction is relative, however, and the wide popularity of these artists is one of the reasons for the intermingling throughout the nation of the traditions they roughly represent.

Hillbilly music matured during the 1930s, in spite, or because, of the Depression. It effectively covered the nation with the help, if not the respect, of com-

⁷ "Santa Barbara Earthquake" (Laws dG45), Vernon Dalhart, Columbia 15037-D (1925).

⁸ "Poor Orphan Child," The Carter Family, Victor 20877 (August 1, 1927).

⁹ "In the Jail House Now," Jimmie Rodgers, Victor 21245 (February 15, 1928).

mercial media. Hillbilly musicians were becoming thorough-going professionals, still capable of being exploited by the media but at the same time exploiting the media in their own ways. By and large the musicians were still oriented toward personal appearance, and they were anxious to use the commercial media for publicity. They recorded for flat fees and performed their radio shows for little or nothing in order to promote their appearances or to vend songbooks and merchandise on percentage. Media executives, on the other hand, were often slow to recognize a total tie-in of radio, recording, and personal appearances with merchandising. Though the totality was seldom achieved, varieties of the pattern were in operation, not just in the South but throughout the nation. If the music did not have a national audience, it had audiences everywhere in the nation. Recordings were available in dime stores nation-wide and from mail order houses; they sold profitably in the hardest of times. The music was aired on the radio in the early "rural" hours, sometimes at noon, and often on Saturday night "barn dances." Musicians performed at school houses, fairs, and lodge halls. After repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, musicians and recordings were featured in working-class taverns even in northern cities—just as the music had appeared in illegal taverns earlier.

In various forms, hillbilly music was available everywhere. Who listened to it and supported it? In the South just about everybody with access to a radio, with an egg to trade for a record, or with fifty cents to see a performance. In the North? The extent to which the music appealed to transplanted southerners, to northern ruralites and to the northern working class is difficult if not impossible to determine. Hillbilly music in its widest sense had a broad appeal. The variety aired in the Northeast and in the Midwest during much of the thirties avoided many of the striking characteristics of southern performance styles. Its success indicates that there was a general audience in rural and working-class areas for the essence of hillbilly music, if not for its most distinctive styles. On the other hand, a good deal of the music from WLS and other Chicago stations was significantly "down home" and appealed in rural areas of the Midwest. Furthermore, many of the "hardest" southern performances were available from the border stations.

The programming of stations just outside the limits of the United States helps support the conjecture that commercial media in the United States were not reaching all significant segments of their audience. In 1930 the "goat-gland" specialist, Dr. John R. Brinkley, having lost his radio license in Kansas, launched the first of a number of radio stations just across the Mexican border, beamed to the United States on a wattage that blanketed the nation. Begun to publicize operations for sexual rejuvenation, the programs peddled reactionary politics, old time religion, hair dye, Peruna, mail-order tombstones, evergrowing plants, and pictures of J-E-S-U-S that glowed in the dark—all to the tune of a wide variety of hillbilly music. In the late thirties similar fare was available from CKLW, Windsor, Ontario—beamed to the Detroit hillbillies but audible as far south as Columbus, Ohio. It is worthy of note that despite their dependence on transcriptions, these stations stressed the "live" approach. XERA and other Mexican stations had live performers, but they often made use of transcriptions of full programs in the absence of the performers, rather than commercial recordings. When they did use commercial recordings, the announcers maintained the fiction that the artists were present. A nightly XERA program featured the performances of Bob and Joe (pre-

sumably derived from the Shelton Brothers), but on successive nights one might hear the recordings of Bill and Charlie Monroe, the Blue Sky Boys (Bill and Earl Bolick), the Callahan Brothers, or any other male duo whose records were available. CKLW normally used transcriptions by the Carter Family, Mainer's Mountaineers, and other performers to simulate live performances.

The music performed in the 1930s became less and less "traditional" in that the repertory of necessity expanded beyond the mountaineer's folk inheritance. But the repertory remained largely distinctive. Items of current urban song did appear, but sparingly. Only the rare items that seemed to fit were performed, and deliberate attempts to blend urban and rural traditions were not really successful. Northern radio stations did mix artists in programming, but their repertoires were usually distinct. The new songs grew from the old—or at least on the pattern of the old, and they were normally the productions of the performers themselves. Such songs often entered tradition, the tradition of the professional hillbillies, who were learning from each other. But though they might monitor each others' programs and "cover" each others' records, a real "hit" technique had yet to develop. The new songs still dealt with the realities already outlined. There was on the one hand a more cynical, blues reaction to sexual relations and on the other a deepening of the nostalgic references to home, mother, and the farm. Current events were not neglected, and one can compile an impressive list of titles and recordings of topical and protest materials. These tended to be nonce productions and became "traditional" only through their discovery by urban intellectuals. But such songs, a distinct minority among the new productions, illustrate the realistic approach of hillbilly music. Along with tales of fires, floods, kidnappings, and bank robberies, the minstrels sang "The Old Age Pension Check," "Mean Old Sixty-Five Blues," and "Sales Tax on the Women." The repertory included a greater number of songs dealing more explicitly with sexual relationships, while preserving a large amount of traditional material, both "mountain" and "western."

We must note the relation of cowboy songs to the hillbilly repertory, style, and image. Cowboy songs were in the repertory of eastern hillbillies before the commercialization of the tradition. Ex-cowboys began recording in 1925. Yet the cowboy contribution, in addition to a relatively few traditional songs, was more image than actuality. Whatever was viable in the music of the cowboy was largely absorbed into hillbilly tradition by 1930. After this time, cowboy singers came under the spell of pop or hillbilly music, and whatever authentic cowboy culture remained now borrowed the hillbilly tradition. But the cowboy "myth" was as influential on hillbilly music as on American mass culture. Although cowboy and hillbilly music were and are often bracketed, there is a connotative difference. The cowboy's image was almost the reverse of the hillbilly's. Furthermore, the culture that gave birth to hillbilly music shared the general regard for the image of the cowboy as representing values that were being lost in the urbanization of America. After all, the hillbilly "uniform" is more humorous than romantic. So the hillbilly musician adopted the songs and the image of the cowboy; he composed ersatz cowboy songs, and assumed the ersatz dress of the movie cowboy. In style there was little to adopt.

The commercial media were spreading regional and individual styles so widely during the thirties that one can note a variety of tendencies among artists in all sections of the nation, but Southeast and Mideast developments tended to be more

rooted in the so-called mountain tradition. Fiddle bands continued to flourish (though their documentation on phonograph recordings diminished) and their development was rather "straight-line": they became smoother and more integrated; when they became "hotter" it was largely through the influence of pop-jazz.¹⁰ One of the outstanding developments was that of vocal duets, in which emphasis was often on a high tenor reminiscent of the style of older sacred music as well as the strident solo of older secular singing.¹¹ The emphasis on harmony stimulated the development of family units, often brother or husband-wife teams. More and more female artists became a part of the profession, though almost always as part of larger groups. Individual artists still roamed from radio station to radio station, and the hillbilly band was a standard unit; but the great "acts" of the period were the vocal duos, even when part of larger groups. The prominence of Bill and Charlie Monroe, Bill and Earl Bolick (*The Blue Sky Boys*), Jack and Jim Anglin, and Howard and Dorsey Dixon as well as the composition of larger bands demonstrate decreasing emphasis on fiddle and banjo, the triumph of the guitar as basic accompaniment instrument, and the emergence of mandolin or steel guitar as a lead instrument.¹² All these trends, as well as minor contradictions, can be observed in the rise to prominence of Roy Acuff. His band, which also illustrates the addition of a slapped bass or "doghouse," is not an example of the finest workmanship that developed in the traditional instrumental music of the Southeast. Nor did the vocal performances have the artistry within the tradition that can be remarked elsewhere. Rather, Roy Acuff and the Smoky Mountain Boys epitomize the southeastern tradition almost to the point of parody. The string band featured the unamplified wail of a steel guitar; banjo was restricted to frolic pieces or as background to performances that were actually humorous exaggerations of traditional performances; vocal solos and harmonies were high and strident. The entire performance was an immense and sincere wail of sorrow.¹³ Acuff himself specialized in sentimental "heart songs," and his performance made "weepers" of whatever it touched, be the song from the older folk tradition, the nineteenth-century pop repertory, the gospel hymn books, the growing productions of hillbilly tunesmiths, or the increasing number of "blues" tunes.

The "blues" tradition—that is, the influence of Negro and Negro-based materials including jazz and genuine blues—was evident in hillbilly music from the moment it began to be documented. Southeastern performers were singing "white blues" and playing hot instrumentals in the 1920s. Jimmie Rodgers popularized both the songs and the style, so that there was no regional limitation to the style in the 1930s. But the tradition flourished most significantly in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma. It was in this area, rather than in the hillbilly communities of the industrial North, that the greatest acculturation took place. Whereas in the Southeast the frolic pieces, the blues, and the sentimental songs coexisted in the repertory, usually with stylistic differences in performance, they tended to coalesce in south-western tradition, dominated by a blues-jazz influence.

¹⁰ "Let Her Go, God Bless Her," J. E. Mainer's Mountaineers, *Bluebird* 6104 (August 6, 1935).

¹¹ "I'm Thinking Tonight of the Old Folks," *The Monroe Brothers* (Charles and Bill), *Bluebird* 6773 (October 12, 1936).

¹² "Sales Tax on the Women," *Dixon Brothers* (Howard and Dorsey), *Bluebird* 6327 (1936).

¹³ "Precious Jewel," Roy Acuff and the Smoky Mountain Boys, *Okeh* 05956 (April 1940).

There are a number of explanations for this acculturation, from the influence of the Louisiana blues and jazz traditions to the oil boom in Texas and Oklahoma. At country dances and in taverns or honky-tonks, the older Anglo country music met Cajun, blues, jazz, and even Mexican styles. The strength of the Anglo folk tradition had long been undermined by the growing heterogeneity of the population; there was not such a restrictive set of urban pop music values as obtained in the North; and there was a meeting of many traditions on a folk level. The southeastern white folk culture tended to reaffirm its values in the face of cultural change. The hillbilly ghettos in the North were continually reaching back to their heritage, but the folk of the Southwest became the leading urban hillbillies. Discounting the special influence of Cajun and Mexican traditions, we can perceive the pattern. The Southeast acculturated more slowly than the Southwest. The hillbilly tradition in the North (as illustrated in exposure and performance in the ghettos, but not on radio and recordings) accepted the southwestern trends, but it did not become creative until the newer music became influential in the Southeast.

Many southern string bands in the 1920s were essentially interested in playing music—any music—in the rather “hot” style they were developing. Clayton McMichen, the talented fiddler of Atlanta, tried with no great success to record pop songs in hot string arrangements. Groups such as the Hack String Band of western Kentucky made no great hits with their instrumental rags. But in the Southwest the same kind of ideas came to fruition. Country bands in Texas began playing all kinds of tunes in styles strongly influenced by jazz rhythms. The small string ensembles developed into large aggregations fittingly called orchestras. They differed from their eastern counterparts not only in size but in instrumentation. A percussion-slapped bass, drums, and tenor banjo became prominent. The piano, rarely present in the East, was a staple in many bands. The extent to which the electrification of the steel guitar and later the “straight” guitar was necessary because of the competition of other instruments (or to be heard in the smaller ensembles in honky-tonks) is difficult to determine. At any rate, in the late thirties southwestern bands were not only hot but swinging. The hillbilly and jazz traditions had mingled. Jazz musicians sat in with the country string bands and facilitated the development of western swing. Prominent bands like Bob Wills’ added horns—trumpets, trombones and saxophones. They played traditional breakdowns and pop tunes; and—most important—pseudocowboy or western numbers developed in the Southwest. The repertory ranged from low-down honky-tonk numbers, often with Mexican influence, to rather sophisticated urban songs. This was basically dance music, though the vocal refrains were not unimportant.¹⁴ The tradition reached its apogee after World War II and its descent practically paralleled that of the big swing bands. The practitioners of western swing are now small combos playing their music in “western” clubs, but not a factor in big-time country-western music.

It was, paradoxically, the smaller groups of the Southwest that represent the basic stratum of current country-western music—or, one might say, some basic elements of western swing developed in another direction. Instead of following the route of the jazz ensemble and developing a predominantly dance form, the

¹⁴ “Steel Guitar Rag,” Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, Okeh 03394 (September 30, 1936); “Bring It on Down to My House, Honey,” Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, Okeh 03492 (September 30, 1936).

other branch of southwestern tradition stuck more closely to the Jimmie Rodgers path. It emphasized a variety of "blues" vocal with mainly supporting instrumentation, developed from bluesy straight guitar to small honky-tonk combos, and of course eventually added the electrified steel guitar. At one extreme it was a white copy of the Negro "party blues" (for example, "She's Sellin' What She Used to Give Away"),¹⁵ and at the other it was minor western swing. But what was most lasting in the tradition was the syncopated backing of lyrics expressing the problems of sexual and marital relationships in which the neon sign of the tavern was seldom absent. From rather pallid and derivative items like "Bear Cat Mama from Horner's Corners," the lyrics moved to the more significant problem of "When We Go Honky Tonkin'." Elements of this tradition were widespread in the late thirties, but reached a peak of development in the Southwest just at the outset of World War II, which facilitated the spread of this as well as other varieties of country music.

We have already seen that long before 1941 hillbilly music was a commonplace in both the rural and urban North. It was available on large stations and even on network shows—the WLS National Barn Dance, the WSM Grand Ole Opry, the WLW Boone County Jamboree, Gene Autry's Melody Ranch. But even when dressed in the sombrero and chaps of the cowboy, it had both a rural and low-class image. It was early morning and Saturday night music for the yokels. It was profitable, more profitable than the music industry generally recognized, but it did not appeal to the mass market to which the music industry pitched its product.

During World War II hillbilly made its largest single leap in mass appeal, and the music business recognized and exploited its new popularity. Certain internal disputes in the music industry facilitated the acceptance: the ASCAP dispute of 1940, which threw the media back on material in the public domain and on music under the control of licensing organizations more hospitable to country music eventually gave an economic boost to composers of country material; the American Federation of Musicians' recording ban of 1942–1944 promoted the fortunes of small hillbilly oriented labels that signed with the union. But these were relatively minor events that did little more than stimulate what now seems inevitable.

The significant reasons for the phenomenal growth of country music (for it soon outgrew the hillbilly title) involve population shifts, industrial and economic expansion, and the emotional temper of the war years. War industries shifted families from rural areas to the cities and from the Southeast and Southwest to the North and the West Coast. It put more money into the pockets of those with a taste for country music. Service in the armed forces tended to integrate (not without violence) boys from different areas with different musical tastes; country music was almost forced upon the serviceman, whether he liked it or not. He could not always silence a company radio tuned to the armed forces network; nor could he always silence the guitar of the boy on the next bunk. The training camps of the South and the Southwest exposed the recruit to a heavy dose of country music, on the radio and in the honky tonks. For example, one could stroll past a long succession of taverns in Biloxi, Mississippi, and often follow Ernest Tubb's "Try Me One More Time" verse by verse through the open doors.¹⁶ One

¹⁵ "She's Sellin' What She Used to Give Away," Buddy Jones, Decca 5613 (1938).

¹⁶ "Try Me One More Time," Ernest Tubb, Decca 6093 (1942).

may well ask why, except for the location of training camps, the pattern was not reversed, why country music and its audience were not altered by exposure to urban music. One answer is, of course, that country music was to be affected tremendously. But the music and its listeners had already been long exposed to varieties of urban music, and country music was their answer, their bridge between folk and urban values. Finally, there were the temper and needs of the time.

Country music appealed to a wide range of simple and fundamental values. It was melodic and singable. Its lyrics dealt both directly and sentimentally with the problems of the time. The return to simplicity in song had already been shown by the national popularity of "You Are My Sunshine," which moved from country to pop in 1941. The draft and the war were treated directly and meaningfully in the country idiom, for example, "I'll Be Back in a Year, Little Darlin'." The country song writers could speak out with unabashed patriotism, though some of their efforts were awful by any standards. But the songs—old and new—dealt with love and separation, mother and home, drink and death. On the one hand, the music reinforced the fundamental values of all American society; on the other hand, segments of it were dealing with the gin mills, the B-girls, the broken romances and marriages under the stresses of urbanization in general and the war boom in particular. When pop music touched the same chords it had to go back to similar sources, for example, "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree." Country musicians were reaching large segments of the populace, and country songs were spilling over into the pop repertory. Neither the country nor the pop professionals knew quite how to deal with the problem. Elton Britt's 1942 recording of "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere" became such a national success that it made the radio "Hit Parade," and publisher Bob Miller threatened to sue if it was played again, for he felt its country style was being destroyed. But in 1943 the publishers of Al Dexter's "Pistol Packing Mama" sued the "Hit Parade" because their hit song was being ignored.

The decade following the end of World War II witnessed the development of country music into a significant segment of American mass music. A considerable part of the growth was in merchandizing—expanding radio coverage, better record distribution and promotion, and well-managed tours and personal appearances. The result was a considerable alteration in the character of the music and its producers and performers. Country music came under the aegis of the hit and star system. In 1941 *Billboard* began hesitantly to notice hillbilly music, first as "western," then as "folk," and finally in 1949 as "country and western." The recordings gained entry to the popularity charts, causing a shift in the emphasis at least of the country performers. They geared themselves more to the current, the immediate. One of the profitable aspects of hillbilly records had been the continued, if not enormous, sale of individual discs. Now the profits came in quick popularity, rapid sale, and "logging" of radio station plays. The performer needed new material, he needed to plug it, and he needed to identify himself with it. Instead of drawing on a deep and time-tested repertory, he tended to promote the current songs both on radio and at personal appearances. Performers without hits to promote were driven to cash in on the popularity of the performances of other artists. And of course the need for new material strained the ca-

pacities of the performers, so that they had to turn to the talents of others, and a Tin Pan Alley of country music grew rapidly.

The immediate postwar period was one of transition, in which older styles and materials had considerable influence. Regional styles were still in evidence; western swing was predominantly Southwest and West Coast, while southeastern string bands and vocal duos continued mountain traditional and tradition-based performances. But stylistic blending and innovation were proceeding rapidly. Ernest Tubb brought the southwestern music to the Grand Ole Opry stage in person, and electric guitars were adopted generally. Nonelectric bands like Johnnie (Wright) and Jack (Anglin) and The Tennessee Mountain Boys experimented with a Latin beat. Eddie Arnold, a Tennessee boy who had been a featured singer with the midwestern-styled Golden West Cowboys of Pee Wee King, rose to national prominence as a mellow-voiced singer of sentimental love songs, with the backing of a sweet-sliding electric steel guitar.¹⁷ To observe Eddy Arnold and Ernest Tubb performing a Saturday afternoon show before an audience of screaming Nashville teenagers gave one an understanding both of the blending of styles and the development of a new audience.

Both points are well illustrated in the output of the new postwar label, King Records of Cincinnati. Its president, the late Sidney Nathan, seems to have deliberately set out to exploit the collision taking place between the old and the new, the East and the West. He developed "the King sound" by setting a performer of basically southeastern tradition against a studio background of southwestern style with a hot steel guitar and at times even clarinet and trumpet.¹⁸ Or the performer would be given a new honky-tonk type song, sometimes composed by Nathan himself. Although Cajun and Anglo styles had been blending in the Southwest, it was Nathan who recognized the possibilities of "Jolie Blon" when Moon Mullican's band was using it as a "warm-up" number. Nathan turned it into the national sensation "New Pretty Blonde."¹⁹ And Nathan, reversing the usual procedure, mated Mullican's Louisiana honky-tonk style with the maudlin "Sweeter Than the Flowers." The new and the old were also blended in the updating into a postwar hit of "Filipino Baby." As composed and recorded by Bill Cox before World War II, it recounted the romance of a "colored sailor" and a "black-faced" girl from the Caroline Islands. On (Lloyd) Cowboy Copas' King release, the "little sailor" returns from South Carolina to marry his "dark-faced Filipino baby." The King releases range between the extremes of the old-timey Mainer's Mountaineers to the near-jazz of Eddie Smith and the Chiefs, and they include many sacred songs in holiness styles. They indicate not only the range and interaction of postwar styles but the growing importance of the recording executive and the studio musician. No longer did the country musician unpack his song bag in the studio and perform as he did elsewhere. Material began to be "placed" with executives and performers. And the "sound" as well as the musician began to be programmed. So one cannot always assume identity between a recorded and a live performance (though the greatest difference was yet to come), just as one cannot judge com-

¹⁷ "Bouquet of Roses," Eddy Arnold, RCA Victor 20-2806 (1948).

¹⁸ "Rainbows at Midnight," Bill and Cliff Carlisle, King 535 (1946).

¹⁹ "New Pretty Blonde," Moon Mullican and His Show Boys, King 578 (1947).

pletely the character of country-western music by the material that reached the top ten of *Billboard's* popularity charts.

Once country-western music became established as a genre appealing to a national market, lines of distinction became even more tenuous. What is country-western becomes what is listed in that category of the charts, based on the categorization of recording companies and the decisions of disc jockeys. It is not altogether relevant for us to offer a differing categorization based on stylistic and content analysis when we are at the same time studying evolution and mutation in style and content. The artist is a better criterion, though after 1948 country and pop artists begin crossing chart lines, as does material. A socioeconomic analysis of the audience of all American music—which of course does not exist—might provide a better basis on which to categorize types of music as we are approaching them here. Otherwise we must accept the judgment and audience aim of the music industry. We can, of course, decide that the high position of Gene Autry's "Here Comes Santa Claus" on the charts reflects a certain specialized audience rather than anything we might want to categorize as urban hillbilly, but the issuance of country-western Christmas recordings in general is a significant development. The popularity chart may be used as indicative of major trends, as long as we remember that performances of somewhat different character also were available to the public and even made the top one hundred on the charts. We should not forget that musical forces significant to us are not represented. For example, the important genre of bluegrass never made the top ten of the *Billboard* charts, and nothing even derivative of it is represented before 1961.

In 1948 the chart situation is relatively clear. All artists are identifiably "country" or "western." Styles are almost all some form of honky-tonk, western swing, or smooth movie western. Songs are almost all artist-derived or from a small fraternity of tunesmiths like Fred Rose. There is a revival of an old item from the thirties yodeling tradition ("Chime Bells") and a genuinely traditional text ("Deck of Cards"). A ringer like "Buttons and Bows" by Gene Autry causes no consternation, but on the chart are two recordings of "Tennessee Waltz." Though neither ever attained the top position, "Tennessee Waltz" was to help make country-western music even less of a distinct genre when two years later it was recorded by Patti Page and became one of the best-selling songs in the history of American popular music. Country songs had "crossed the line" before, but "Tennessee Waltz" geared the industry to a far wider market.

Curiously enough, in the period between the height of popularity of "Tennessee Waltz" as a country-western release and its success in the broad field of popular music Hank Williams appeared as a summary of country-western trends and as the most important bridge to their broad popularity. And again curiously enough, Hank Williams was as country-based as they come, or rather he was a typical product of the forces of urbanization on the southeastern poor white. He reeked of the parched fields of Alabama, the dirty streets and dives of Montgomery. He embodied drunken Saturday nights in the tavern and soul-saving Sundays in the country church. It was all there in him, and it was all there in his music. He had the gospel, blues, and sentimental tradition from folk and professional sources. He had inhaled the postwar honky-tonk style with every breath, and miraculously

he formed a band, the Drifting Cowboys, to complete the image. As the apogee of the honky-tonk style, he conquered the "core" country audience with older blues like "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It" and "Mind Your Own Business," but scored as well with the love-lorn "Wedding Bells." He presented—in fact he was—the dichotomy, the polarization of the urban hillbilly: he went "honky tonkin',"²⁰ but knew he was "Headed Down the Wrong Highway"; he cheated, was cheated on, cursed her "Cheatin' Heart," "Dreamed About Mama Last Night,"²¹ and looked forward to the land "Beyond the Sunset." Williams' popularity did not stop with what should have been his "normal" audience but apparently spilled over into general American culture, or at least his songs did. I say "apparently" because no breakdown can be made of the audience who accepted his performances. The extent to which Hank Williams' compositions are his own or those of Fred Rose is still argued. But in whatever division can be made, the spirit and essence of most of his songs are certainly his own, and he "sold" them so that they—rather than comparable country-western numbers—were taken up by pop artists. As far as Williams' message was concerned, the urban hillbilly audience was larger than one would have guessed. And henceforth country performers and composers could at least hope for a wider market.

The death of Hank Williams in 1953 was celebrated in a still-continuing series of "tribute" songs, the best of which, "Death of Hank Williams" by Jack Cardwell, was in the traditional "tragedy" pattern. The stage was set for another onslaught on the insularity of country-western music. Actually the appearance of "Goodnight Irene" on the charts in 1950 was an important portent of yet another influence, but its real force was not felt until much later. Blues and Negro music in general had long been a shaping force on the tradition embodied in country-western, but until 1954 the influence had come from the older country blues, jazz, and ragtime music. Now the newer rhythm and blues music exerted its influence. Rock-and-roll is demonstrably the fusion of country or country-oriented style with rhythm and blues. First recorded in the North, it erupted in Memphis in the form of rockabilly, with Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins. There is still argument whether or not early rock and roll is country-western music, but the argument is really futile in the face of the facts. Rock and roll grew away from country-western music but it left its mark. Early recordings of rock and roll made the country-western as well as the pop charts, and I can testify that a folk music collector can record "Blue Suede Shoes," "Raunchy," and "Bye Bye Love" in the field. Rock and roll affected both the style and attitude of everyone associated with country-western music. The last link in the country-urban chain had been forged. Country songs could make it in the pop world, and country musicians could also make it if they changed their styles.

As folk musicians had once raced to be exploited by commercial media, so many country-western performers now agreed to the necessary compromises in order to make the pop charts as performers. The fiddles and steel guitars that marked the honky-tonk sound began to disappear; drums, piano, choral, and lush violin backgrounds came in. The music was not all a bland, homogenized style—though this

²⁰ "Honky Tonkin'," Hank Williams, MGM 10171 (1946).

²¹ "I Dreamed about Mama Last Night," Luke the Drifter (Hank Williams), MGM 11017.

trend was ever present—but it moved away from country, whether to rock or to pop. The cool, relaxed “Nashville” sound predominated.²²

Country music was now moving toward pop faster than pop was moving toward country. That the movement was somewhat arrested is certainly due in part to two forces, one internal and the other external to the country-western industry, but which became temporarily joined: bluegrass music and the urban folk music “revival.” Bluegrass music is a hybrid form developed basically from the southeastern styles of the 1930s, resisting the greatest impact of western swing and honky-tonk influences. The style grew within the Bluegrass Boys, a band of continually shifting personnel led by Bill Monroe, whose superb musicianship, dedication to his idea of music, and dominating personality were mainly responsible for the cocoon out of which bluegrass burst. During World War II, Bill Monroe’s band was distinguished by its dedication to the older string-band tradition heavily influenced by the Jimmie Rodgers type of blues. It kept largely to a deep selection of the traditional repertory, which Monroe carefully taught his musicians. Then in 1945 his band evolved a complex ensemble style in which unelectrified instruments trade solo, countermelody and rhythm, and basic rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. The most striking element was the prominence of the five-string banjo, which had almost disappeared from commercial hillbilly music, performed by Earl Scruggs in a three-finger style he had perfected from North Carolina folk tradition. The band featured vocal solos in the older high, tight, “objective” style, duets with the old high harmony, and gospel quartets.²³ Because of the wide and rapid touring of the Bluegrass Boys, as well as their Opry broadcasts, the style was well known before recordings of it were released. The style was new, yet old; modern, yet traditional. By 1953 it had spawned numerous bands in its exact image, and the Scruggs-style banjo was to become almost an epidemic. Bluegrass seemed to give southeastern tradition a new, if highly stylized, lease on life. In spite of its place at the grass roots, it would not have reached the stature it did had it not been for the urban folk music revival.

Just as country-western music in the fifties was attempting to shed the last of its rural and low-class trappings and become urban middle-class music, national taste turned back to the grass roots, to the folksy. The urban interest in folk music skipped over country-western, and at first even early hillbilly, to what was thought at least to be authentic folk. Such an approach was anathema to a burgeoning music market geared to the newly created rather than to the traditional songs in the public domain. Growing urban interest in folk music stressed participation, not consumption. The urban “folk musicians” assimilated the folk music to urban tastes and eventually saturated the very pop market country-western was seeking. The “revival” was of course much more complicated than this, but we are interested mainly in the reaction of the country music industry. One of the earliest efforts seems to have been the attempt to appeal to the image of the past that lay behind the revival by embodying it in new material, fake ballads. A real country musician, Jimmy Driftwood (James Morris), showed the way by setting new words to “The Eighth of January,” creating “The Battle of New Orleans.” In the

²² “Four Walls,” Jim Reeves, RCA Victor 447-0413 (1957).

²³ “Molly and Tenbrooks” (Laws H27), Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, Columbia 20612 (1945).

Nashville of a few years before, it is doubtful that he would have gotten a hearing, let alone have been granted an LP recording. Needless to say, Driftwood's country style was not promoted, but in 1959 "The Battle of New Orleans" became a hit for Johnny Horton, and Eddie Arnold put Driftwood's "Tennessee Stud" in the top ten the same year. "Johnny Reb," "Long Black Veil,"²⁴ "Sink the Bismarck," "Don't Take Your Guns to Town," and others followed.

The efforts of country-western music to capture the sound and image of the revival were not notably successful. Country-western recordings of folksongs popular in the revival were not top sellers ("500 Miles" was an exception). Nor did revival-tinged performances draw much play, though such techniques as modulation and stressing of flat sevenths became accepted techniques of arrangement. Country-western executives did try—even to the ridiculous lengths of "Bluegrass Hootenanny" albums, which were neither. Their efforts did not click with the old country audience, and the revival almost totally ignored country-western. Older performers were resurrected by the revival, and veterans still performing had to reach back to their roots before making the stage of the folk music night club or the folk music festival. Johnny Cash was the only leading performer to get a real hearing, with the exception of bluegrass musicians. Indeed bluegrass became the real "old-time" music to the urban intellectual as well as to the rural audience of the South. In turn bluegrass has shown the most revival influence in its recent material and style. It has been suggested that so little bluegrass is played by disc jockeys not only because of chart consciousness, but because they have been advised not to play the music under any circumstances, no matter how many requests they receive—a revenge for the attention given to bluegrass during the revival instead of to other forms of country-western.²⁵

Yet the revival did turn country-western back toward its roots, which it had practically forgotten; the industry became more conscious of its history. Though the Country Music Association is a trade organization whose early efforts were directed against the onslaught of rock and roll, it eventually founded a Country Music Hall of Fame. Only recently has the Association come to realize that there was much country music before World War II, besides that of Jimmie Rodgers, but understanding is growing. This historical consciousness has been at least one of the factors that has made the industry more responsive to various segments of the buying public. The reissue of earlier recordings for a limited market—partially in response to "bootlegging"—is but one indication of the shift from the drive for a single, homogenized market. At least I believe I can detect the effects even in the top-selling recordings, for we must admit that promotion is a big part of popularity in the entertainment industry.

The music of recent years demonstrates a return to somewhat recent roots in a resurgence of the steel guitar and a form of southwestern honky-tonk. A new West Coast or "Bakersfield sound" has emerged, modifying honky-tonk with harder rock.²⁶ Basic audiences such as the truck-driving fraternity are being more successfully appealed to in songs like "Giddyup Go." Perhaps the death of the

²⁴ "Long Black Veil," Lefty Frizzell, Columbia CL 2488 (1959).

²⁵ Bill Vernon, "Bluegrass Stands the Test," *The World of Country Music* (Billboard, Sec. 2), October 28, 1967, pp. 84–86.

²⁶ "We're Gonna Let the Good Times Roll," Buck Owens, Capitol ST 2283 (1967).

folk music revival and the emergence of folk rock and acid music have done much to point out that there is no longer one pop audience. Not that country-western has been driven back into an enclave—far from it. Country-pop is still strong, and performers and songs cross chart lines with great regularity. The line between genres is as hazy as ever. Not only has country-western inherited the twelve-string guitar from the urban revival, but all kinds of studio “noncountry” instruments are introduced at recording sessions, further removing the music from live performance.

I would, however, like to conclude by emphasizing one thematic element that may not unify recent country-western music but that is certainly a major thread in the fabric and directs us most particularly to an urban hillbilly audience. Sex, drink, and illicit love may or may not be the outstanding characteristics of urban society, but they are certainly so in a good percentage of country-western songs. The subjects were far from absent in early hillbilly music and in the folk music that preceded it. Folk and hillbilly music borrowed Paul Dresser’s song of a repentant whore, “Tell Them That You Saw Me”; and hillbilly music produced the song about the fate of the wayward girl in “Unloved and Unclaimed.” There is, of course, a difference in treatment in the more recent country-western approach, but I maintain that there is also an identity.

The earlier songs seem to be sharply divided in that there is one category of songs of drink and frolic and carnality, involving the performer and audience, and another category that laments, condemns, or moralizes from outside the situation. Both earlier categories, at least in general performance, are far from explicit in facing these situations, but the country-western approach seems to fuse the two and has become far more frank. Settings or referents in numerous songs are the barroom and tavern. To be sure, there are songs treating simply the convivial aspects of “Sam’s Place” (1967), but there is usually a hint of problems, as in the rowdy and humorous “Don’t Squeeze my Sharmon” (1967). More often the tavern is a lonely escape or a temptation and destroyer of explicit or assumed values. Women function in barroom scenes both as tempters and as the tempted and destroyed. The girl leaves the only one who ever loved her to go back to “The Wild Side of Life” (1952). The man may complain of being left within his “Four Walls” (1957), but his condemnation may be answered by the woman’s pointing out that “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” (1952).²⁷

The country-western lyrics face aspects of the current world of the urban hillbilly with directness unusual in popular song. And they are not “ballads” in the sense of narratives about the events. They are direct statements by the participants, with whom the listener identifies. The lyrics deal with the “real” world of current life and the “real” problems. The world and the life are accepted, but they are not approved of. Seldom, as in “City Lights” (1958), is the contrast between the rural and the urban scene made explicit, as it was in the older lyrics; but the contrast is implicit and sometimes suggested musically and symbolically. “The Wild Side of Life” and “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” are set to a tune that carries, among others, two well-known older texts: “I’m Thinking Tonight of My

²⁷ Kitty Wells, Decca 28232.

Blue Eyes" is a lament in the older tradition by a girl forsaken by her lover; "The Great Speckled Bird" is perhaps the most notable holiness-gospel song. Similar techniques may be observed in "Almost Persuaded" (1966), in which the narrator dances with a girl in a barroom and is "almost persuaded" to forget his marriage vows until he sees in her eyes the reflection of his wedding ring. Though the tune is only faintly reminiscent, the title is identical with that of a familiar gospel song.²⁸

The lyrics may strike the "literary" critic as anything from ridiculous to maudlin, just as the wailing, melismatic honky-tonk vocal style will adversely affect the listener from another musical tradition, but both elements reflect a significant life style. And the lyrics manage, without violating language taboos, to give an amazingly accurate picture of at least a significant part of "The World of Country Music." The girl in the barroom who pleads, "Take Me to Your World" (1968), where love is not a four-letter word and she will not have to hear another dirty joke, may well become the matron who snarls, "Don't Come Home a-Drinkin' with Lovin' on Your Mind" (1966), only to be answered by her husband's reaction to "a worn-out wife like you." Whatever humor can be derived from the material resides in the embarrassing directness of its realism, not in its sentimentality and naiveté. The country-western text tends to face "The Cold Hard Facts of Life" (1967), the title of a song in which the man overhears a stranger in a liquor store announce that he is on his way to a party at the house of a woman whose husband is away. The husband proceeds unexpectedly to his home, sees the stranger's car in the driveway, commits murder, and faces the legal penalty.²⁹ Soap opera? Perhaps, but also tomorrow's headlines.

The recognition of marital problems and extramarital affairs has been a continuing and increasingly popular theme since the 1940s. "One Has My Name, the Other Has My Heart" (1948) was relatively reticent in its approach compared with later lyrics, though not as coy and moralistic as "Don't Rob Another Man's Castle" (1949). "Slipping Around" (1949)³⁰ is more direct, but full of guilty regret, while its sequel, "I'll Never Slip Around Again," shows how the later relationship of the guilty couple is poisoned. So "Back Street Affair" (1952) is answered by "(I'm) Paying for that Back Street Affair" (1953), this time from the viewpoint of the woman. Women have an increasing voice in songs of "The Stolen Moments" (1955) in the "Game of Triangles" (1966), whether as the aggressor in "If a Woman Answers" (1962) or the aggrieved in "The Home You're Tearin' Down" (1965). The wife may indeed appear not as a black or white morality character but as an ambiguous figure who complains of "The Evil on Your Mind" (1966) in such a way that the truth of her nagging suspicions is unconfirmed, particularly in the light of her account of her own opportunities, with the veiled threat of retaliation in kind.³¹ The situation may be dramatized in a telephone conversation, with the "other woman" speaking openly of the relationship and the husband answering "Yes, Mr. Peters" (1965) for the benefit of his wife. The contrast with the older value system may again be musically im-

²⁸ David Houston, Epic 4-2257.

²⁹ Porter Wagoner, RCA Victor 447-0786.

³⁰ Floyd Tillman, Columbia 4-33058.

³¹ Skeeter Davis, RCA Victor LSP 3667.

plied, as in "Come on Home" (1968), which echoes "Lord, I'm Coming Home."³²

Explicit references to divorce, however, tend to trigger explicit moralizing. Only exceptionally, as in "Divorce Me C. O. D." (1946),³³ is the attitude at all flippant. While there are pleas for dissolution, for the woman to "Set Him Free" (1959), more often the idea of formal severance of the marriage bond makes explicit the conflict between moral and legal codes. So one is "Married by the Bible, Divorced by the Law" (1952),³⁴ and the woman asks, "Will Your Lawyer Talk to God?" (1962). Dramatizations can become quite sentimental, though "I'll Take the Dog" (1966) is unusual in its humor. Splitting up the material assets of the marriage, the couple fail to agree on custody of the canine, and are consequently reconciled.

That songs like this one and "Mama Spank" (1967) augur a more relaxed view of the problems is dubious, but certainly other songs indicate a more emancipated role for the female. As the woman's viewpoint tends to be more directly expressed, it becomes increasingly aggressive. The woman will react to infidelity in kind, singing "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad" (1967) or taunting her husband with her knowledge of and intention to visit the fleshpots too, as in "Jackson" (1967), which takes probably the most cynical attitude toward marital sex problems expressed in country-western music. The woman is no longer the forlorn victim, and she will take direct steps to protect her "property," telling her rival, "You Ain't Woman Enough" (1966), and threatening to send her to "Fist City" (1968).³⁵ The man, on the other hand, may adopt the role earlier played by his spouse. He will plead desperately, "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town" (1967). Reduced almost to abject self deception after hearing of the activities of a woman who looks like his wife, talks like his wife, and has the same name as his wife, he can whine, "Darling, Say It's Not You" (1968).

These themes do not represent the totality of even current country-western music. All songs do not deal with problems like "The Other Woman" (1965) or a bar-to-bar search for "Sweet Thang" (1966). Composers and singers may present pieces of almost surrealistic humor like "May the Bird of Paradise Fly up Your Nose" (1965); they may even insist that "It's Such a Pretty World Today" (1967). The fact that such songs are the more likely to move over into general popular acceptance merely emphasizes the sin-sex-booze patterns that are the staple commodities of country-western music. And the significance of the patterns in relation to the tensions of the urban hillbilly is perhaps the most striking example of the value of detailed study of country-western music as a barometer of certain aspects of American culture rather than merely a debased offspring of American folk music.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Materials for the study of country-western music are vast but not easily accessible. Billy Charles Malone's "A History of Commercial Country Music in the United States, 1920-1964" (doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas, 1965) is a pioneer study significant for its dependence on

³² Peggy Little, Dot 17068.

³³ Merle Travis, Capitol 290.

³⁴ Hank Snow, RCA Victor 20-4733.

³⁵ Loretta Lynn, Decca 32264.

published materials of the industry and interviews with selected performers and executives. It further provides references to information in popular and esoteric journals, which I shall not repeat. Malone's book has been published as *Country Music U.S.A.*, The American Folklore Society Memoir Series, Vol. 54 (Austin, 1968). Robert Shelton and Burt Goldblatt, *The Country Music Story* (Indianapolis, 1966) is an interesting and valuable pictorial record, but the text must be used with caution. An important group of articles appeared in the "Hillbilly Issue" of the JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 78 (1965), 195-286. Also of particular interest are Judith McCulloh "Hillbilly Records and Tune Transcriptions," *Western Folklore*, 25 (1967), 225-244; Judith McCulloh, "Some Child Ballads on Hillbilly Records," *Folklore and Society* (Hatboro, Pa., 1966), 107-129; Neil V. Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style: The Emergence of Bluegrass," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE, 80 (1967), 143-150. The greatest single resource for original recordings, song folios, runs of rare journals, discographies, interviews with and memorabilia of artists and executives is The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, University of California, Los Angeles.

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