



JESSE DREW

Country Music's California Heart

With the twang of a steel guitar, the whine of a fiddle, and the plunk of a banjo come an instant association—the pick-up truck, the cowboy boots, the rolling hills, dusty fields, lonesome highways, and the flag. The sound of a country-music refrain evokes the American heartland, the ranch, the farm, the honky-tonk, and beer hall. For many it has also come to signify conservatism, “traditional values,” American chauvinism, and even bigotry. Country music has been prominently featured by every major contemporary conservative political figure from Richard Nixon to both Bush presidents to the vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. With its symbolic home in the American Southlands, stretching from Appalachia to the Texas/Oklahoma Panhandle, and with Nashville as its center, the country empire is safely ensconced in the mythic heart of conservative America. The authenticity of country is closely tied to particular rural landscapes—the green hills, dotted with white churches, in Ol’ Kentucky; the dusty plains of Texas and Oklahoma; the “hollers” of West Virginia. It’s the geography of tradition, conservative values, and cultural stability.

In the eye of the public, nothing could be further from this Red State bastion than the Golden State of California, citadel of change, of “nontraditional lifestyles,” radical protest movements, and rejection of the status quo. The perception of California, with its close association with social experimentation and its rhetorical embrace of

Boom: A Journal of California, Vol. 1, Number 1, pps 50–61. ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2011 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: boom.2011.1.1.50.

The origins of the music have much in common with California values: it comes out of multiculturalism, rebellion, and cultural experimentation.

racial diversity and social tolerance, clashes with the values the country-music industry has tried hard to associate itself with. Yet the state of California can stake a claim to being as much the homeland of country music as the former Confederate states. The California of hope, dreams, and opportunity brought generations of country singers to its borders and the economic engine of California has propagated that music to the rest of America. The mythology of country, however, requires the southern connection to lay claim to the conservative image it has worked so hard to cultivate. A recognition of California's contributions to country would dilute that claim and weaken a substantial artistic pillar on which American conservatism depends for cultural legitimacy—a claim particularly vital as the other powerful cultural icons of rock and roll, hip-hop/rap, and Hollywood films were long ago ceded to liberals and the left.

Though the world view propagated by country is very much at odds with the values associated with California, the origins of the music have much in common with California values: it comes out of multiculturalism, rebellion, and cultural experimentation. In the ethos of contemporary Country Music USA, hard-working people (Caucasian, of course) maintain traditional values and do the job they are expected to do. They overcome adversity through individual endeavor and the truths they seek are personal; they do not ask big questions that extend much beyond the screen door of domestic life. Despite this reputation of being parochial, the origins of country music are in fact strikingly global and multicultural—starting with the musical instruments central to the country sound. The banjo traces its roots to the African stringed instrument called the banjar, which came ashore with African slaves. The ubiquitous country steel guitar is based upon an indigenous Hawaiian instrument popularized by traveling shows after the Hawaiian Islands were annexed to the US mainland at the turn of the last century. The fiddle remains true to its Celtic and Anglo roots, while

the mandolin is generally recognized as coming into the US clutched in the hands of Italian immigrants. It is generally believed that the dulcimer originated in the Near East and China, the harmonica from a Chinese reed instrument that was elaborated upon in Germany and Austria; the oral technique of yodeling emulates that of Swiss performers who traveled the Americas in performance and circus troupes in the 1800s. These diverse musical styles were transmitted via popular minstrel and traveling shows, where a great variety of folk music intermingled from many different ethnic cultures, enriching local musical repertoires. Musicians of all races from the mountains and plains blended ballads, religious tunes, work songs, and other musics into a rich spectrum of song. As one writer puts it, “Blacks and whites mixed their musical traditions, borrowed tunes from each other, and as one mountain musician said, ‘danced together and drank out at the same well.’”¹

Country is a music that can be claimed by no one and everyone; songs are passed down in the oral tradition from generation to generation and continually modified over time, with lyrics updated and retrofitted to reflect new ideas and concerns. Thus, according to the musician and folklorist Utah Phillips, “Country is unequivocally a peoples’ music, a folk music, developed over generations as a common cultural property.”²

Its various musical categories and subcategories, gospel and blues, folk and old-time music, were not put into their genre straitjackets until the turn of the twentieth century, coinciding with the beginning of sound recording and the recognition that popular homegrown music was a valuable commodity. The folk tradition of country music was commercialized as it was brought into the early recording industry and radio networks. In the 1920s and 1930s, with the rise of those industries, the music entered the economic orbit of the entertainment industry. As the music became part of “show business” it was forced to conform to industry

and audience expectations, and ownership of songs became critical. The miraculous techniques of audio recording and radio broadcasting spurred entrepreneurs to discover and deliver musical acts, to encourage the sale of living-room Victrolas, and to promote products on the airwaves. The nascent recording industry separated black and white recordings into distinct categories for marketing, and African-American “race music” wound up on different store shelves from white country music, becoming popularized as “the blues.” The first recording in this genre, released by Okeh Records in 1920, was Mamie Smith, singing “Crazy Blues.” According to Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), “The idea of the blues as a form of music that could be used to entertain people on a professional basis, i.e., that people would actually pay to see and hear blues performed, was a revelation. And it was a revelation that gave large impetus to the concept of the ‘race’ record.”³

For white audiences, “hillbilly” music got its start from the recordings of Fiddlin’ John Carson and the performances of similar talent on early radio programs.⁴ With the rapid sales of “hillbilly” talent, the search was on for country musicians who could record and perform traditional popular tunes. Much of the action centered on the large radio stations that initiated musical programs such as WLS’s (Chicago) National Barn Dance and WSM’s (Nashville) Grand Ole Opry. There was no agreed-upon label for this type of music at this point, although phrases such as “old familiar tunes” or “old-time music” were used.⁵ By the mid-1920s, “hillbilly” became a popular name to describe it, later evolving to the term “folk.” It wasn’t until the 1950s that the name “country and western,” and then just “country,” began to be widely used.⁶

California, Here We Come

The stories of mass migration to California are well understood in the popular consciousness, particularly the ‘49 Gold Rush, the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, and the flight from the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. The rich California traditions of migration, labor struggle, and living out in the elements contributed much to the musical lore of American songwriting. Such hard living inspired a critical look at the conditions people were subjected to, rather than a complacent one. The West, and in particular California, spawned a great number of social reformers and

social critics, from the radical labor organizer Tom Mooney to the electoral reformer Upton Sinclair and his End Poverty In California (EPIC) organization to the muckrakers and critics Frank Norris and Mark Twain, who began his writing career in San Francisco. The lyrical and poetic influence of California and the West can be found in working cowboy ballads and the songs of western hardrock miners, lumberjacks, farmworkers, and sailors. This rough-hewn proletarian culture of workin’ stiffs and roustabouts is perhaps best exemplified by the California native and popular author Jack London, who thrilled American audiences with his adventure tales in the early 1900s and who also served as one of California’s most prominent advocates for socialism and working-class militancy. The Great Depression helped inspire the popular and evocative character of the footloose but socially critical hobo, a good example of which can be found in the classic country song, “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” a 1928 country hit. The original musician, Harry “Haywire Mac” McClintock, was a country performer based in California and had a popular radio program on KFRC radio in San Francisco.⁷ He was also a member of the radical labor group the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains all the cops have wooden
legs
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth and the hens lay soft-
boiled eggs,
The farmers’ trees are full of fruit and the barns are full
of hay,
Oh, I’m bound to go where there ain’t no snow,
Where the rain don’t fall and the wind don’t blow,
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

The hobo theme of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” has been repeated throughout the decades by many country singers, from Jimmie Rodgers’s 1930s hit “Waiting for a Train” to Roger Miller’s “King of the Road,” popular in the 1960s. Besides offering a critique of poverty, hobo songs reflect a utopian desire to escape the drudgery of wage-slavery altogether and to be free of the social conformity imposed upon working people. Of course, such a life was more appealing in warm weather; much of the hobo train-hopping culture revolved around California and the western states, where many poor people moved during the lean years of the Depression, hoping to find work and an agreeable climate. The



King of the Cowboys Roy Rogers, one of America's favorite Western singers, and founder of the group Sons of the Pioneers, wows the crowd at the California State Fair in the 1950s.

Big Rock Candy Mountain was, in some sense, California itself.

Perhaps even more than radio, the prime conveyor of country music at the dawn of electric entertainment was the silver screen. The popular image of the American plains, of cowboys, wagon trails and gittin' along little dogies, is deeply embedded in the American consciousness. Many movie fans don't realize that these are images of California, brought to light by the cultural behemoth of Hollywood. The primary reason for the existence of Hollywood, besides escaping patent lawsuits from eastern manufacturers of film cameras and equipment, was the rich landscape available to exploit for Westerns. Those long trails leading from the Rio Grande to the saloons of Kansas City were for the most

part filmed no further from Los Angeles than Death Valley, California. The cowboy Western, with its singing cowboys, black-hatted desperados, and harmonizing cowpokes in chaps, was a very successful popularizer of country music. Such vehicles propelled Los Angeles-based singers like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers to national fame.

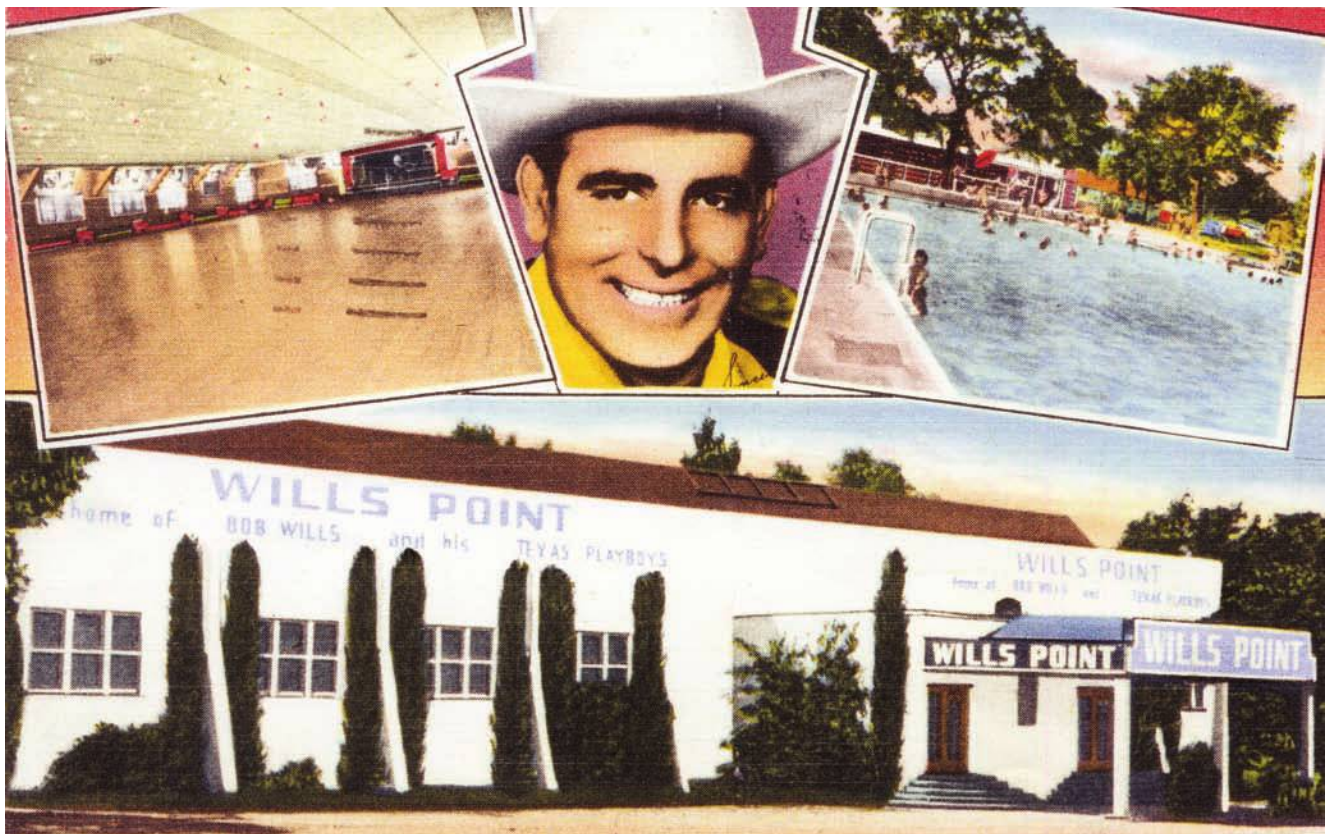
During the severe economic dislocation spurred by drought and the stock-market collapse of 1929, many hillbilly bands pushed west along with waves of migrants from Texas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and the South. Oklahoma's most famous musician of the era may be Woody Guthrie, but many others came from the same southwestern region and were instrumental in developing the sounds of honky-tonk and western swing. Their



Music is a vital part of daily life to this migrant family camped out in California's Central Valley during the Great Depression.

musical talent added to Southern and Central California's emergence as a major center of what was then called folk music, as they found an audience among the state's swelling population and employment in Hollywood Westerns. The audience for folk music was well-established before the "Okie" migration popularized by *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Gerald Haslam, author of *Workin' Man Blues*, points out, during those tough times the Okies were in no condition to be significant consumers of records, radios, or advertised products.⁸ The migration from the South and the Panhandle that began during the Depression grew rapidly during World War II, thanks to the abundance of war-industry work on the West Coast. It was this later migration and economic stability that helped lay the foundation for

the celebrated Bakersfield Sound of musicians like Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Rose Maddox. Through the war years country music prospered greatly in California, particularly in military locales as soldiers and armament workers swung and jitterbugged the night away in off-base saloons and dance halls. Fiddlers and pickers could be heard up and down California on many country radio stations. County fairs throughout California regularly featured country bands. The country icons Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, the kings of western swing, became nationally famous only after they moved to California, where they were based for many years. Despite retaining Texas in the group's name, Wills lived in Los Angeles, Fresno, and then Sacramento, where he helped open a



Wills Point country dance hall on the outskirts of Sacramento, owned by the Western swing superstar Bob Wills of Texas Playboys fame, postcard, 1951

large country dance club called Wills Point on the outskirts of the city.⁹

With the end of World War II, the hysteria of the Cold War emerged in the corridors of Congress. As the 1950s began, McCarthyism crept up on all the culture industries, most notoriously film and broadcasting. The music industry was not left behind. In the right-wing insurgency led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, folk musicians who still insisted on singing songs about workers' rights, social injustice, or rural rebellion were no longer tolerated. Most revealing was the persecution orchestrated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) against the folk singers Pete Seeger and the Weavers. The music industry that had been developing in Nashville and Memphis took this lesson to heart and spurned socially critical music, concentrating on the noncontroversial and the unabashedly patriotic. As part of that dissociation, what had been called folk music was thereafter known as country and western and ultimately just country. Folk music, or socially critical old-time music, was

left behind for the vultures of HUAC to peck. Thus the traditional music played by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Leadbelly, which maintained the cultural lineage of the suffering of the poor, the struggle of labor, and protest against social injustice, was pushed to the margins of popular culture. The country-music industry prospered greatly in Nashville from the 1950s on, while first the Cold War and then the era of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War ripped a deeper chasm between the poles of folk and country.

Radicals and Rednecks

In the center of the city,
 In the shadow of the steeple,
 At the relief office,
 I saw my people,
 As they stood there hungry,
 I stood there whistlin',
 This land was made for you and me.

—Woody Guthrie, "This Land Is Your Land," 1939

THE BILLBOARD Music Popularity Charts

For Reviews and Ratings of Radio and TV Shows See The Billboard Radio-TV Show Charts (Radio Section).

FOLK TALENT AND TUNES

Communications in Care of The Billboard, 500 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood 28

By JOHNNY SIPPET

Artists' Activities

Lefty Frizzell and his new band started at **Cliffie Stone's** Home-town Jamboree, Legion Stadium, El Monte, Calif., October 25 and the Columbia ace broke his own music record there, pulling 6,526 at \$1.50 (incl. tax). **Steve Stebbins**. (Continued on page 49)

Let the stars tell the tale

(Before You Know It) CHRISTMAS WILL BE HERE

BY **ELTON BRITT** and the **Graves Valley Sweethearts**
RCA VICTOR 28-4988



Country & Western (Folk) Record Reviews

Ratings: 90-100 TOPS—80-89 EXCELLENT—70-79 GOOD—40-69 SATISFACTORY—0-39 POOR

How Ratings Are Determined Each rating is on the basis of nine key categories. Each category is assigned a maximum number of points within which each record is rated.

The Categories Following are the maximum points that may be earned by a record in each of the nine categories considered: Song value, 15; interpretation, 15; arrangement, 15; name value, 15; record quality (master, etch, 5); artist's popularity, 15; performance potential, 10; reputation (known—prominence from "hit" and other "top" hits); artist's manufacturer's distribution staff, 10; manufacturer's efficiency, 5.

Each of the records reviewed here expresses the opinion of the members of The Billboard music staff who reviewed the record.

LEFTY FRIZZELL

I'm An Old, Old Man 81

COLUMBIA 21034—Frizzell gives old-timers who still feel they can cut the mustard some moral support. It's set to in a brassy rhythm with a lot of fiddlin' to help it along. It's a good one that should rack up healthy sales.

You're Just Mine 79

A real weeper it sold in heartfelt fashion by Frizzell. His vocal style adds to the emotion.

JOHNNIE AND JACK

Don't Let The Stars Get In Your Eyes 79

V 20750B—Another fine wailing of this tune by headline talent. The many fans of the duo will want this version, but it looks that the million on this tune will be split up in a number of ways.

The Only One I Ever Loved 78

The boys bounce along with a close-harmony reading of a weeper. It's a good one.

(Continued on page 49)

THE BILLBOARD Music Popularity Charts

For Reviews and Ratings of Radio and TV Shows See The Billboard Radio-TV Show Charts (Radio Section).

Best Selling Retail Folk (Country & Western) Records

Based on reports received Oct. 29, 30 and 31

Records listed are Country and Western records that sold best in stores according to The Billboard's special weekly survey among a selected group of retail stores. The majority of these records feature Country and Western records.

POSITION	Weeks Last 10	This to date	Record	Artist	Label
12	1	1	JAMBALAYA	Hank Williams	MGM
15	3	2	INDIAN LOVE CALL	Slim Whitman	Imperial
3	7	3	OLDER AND BOLDER	E. Arnold	Vocalion
6	2	4	BACK STREET AFFAIR	W. Pierce	Decca
5	5	5	SETTIN' THE WOODS ON FIRE	Hank Williams	MGM
16	4	6	IT WASN'T GOD WHO MADE HONKY TONK ANGELS	K. Wells	Decca
3	8	7	OUR HONEYMOON	Carl Smith	Capitol
2	9	8	DON'T LET THE STARS GET IN YOUR EYES	S. McDonald	Capitol
15	10	9	FULL TIME JOB	E. Arnold	Vocalion
1	—	10	DON'T LET THE STARS GET IN YOUR EYES	R. Pierce	Decca

Most Played 'Juke Box Folk (Country & Western) Records

Based on reports received Oct. 29, 30 and 31

Records listed are Country and Western records most played in juke boxes according to The Billboard's special weekly survey among a selected group of juke box operators whose records feature Country and Western records.

POSITION	Weeks Last 10	This to date	Record	Artist	Label
10	1	1	JAMBALAYA	H. Williams	MGM
6	3	2	BACK STREET AFFAIR	W. Pierce	Decca
12	2	3	INDIAN LOVE CALL	Slim Whitman	Imperial
7	5	4	I WENT TO YOUR WEDDING	Hank Snow	Vocalion
7	9	5	FORTUNES IN MEMORIES	E. Tubb	Decca
7	4	6	SETTIN' THE WOODS ON FIRE	Hank Williams	MGM
3	7	6	OLDER AND BOLDER	E. Arnold	Vocalion
4	4	8	IT WASN'T GOD WHO MADE HONKY TONK ANGELS	K. Wells	Decca
3	8	9	OUR HONEYMOON	Carl Smith	Capitol
2	10	10	DON'T LET THE STARS GET IN YOUR EYES	S. McDonald	Capitol

Country & Western Records Most Played by Folk Disk Jockeys

Based on reports received Oct. 29, 30 and 31

Records listed are Country and Western records most played by folk disk jockeys according to The Billboard's special weekly survey among a selected list of over 100 top 495 radio stations in Country and Western areas.

POSITION	Weeks Last 10	This to date	Record	Artist	Label
13	1	1	JAMBALAYA	Hank Williams	MGM
5	3	2	BACK STREET AFFAIR	W. Pierce	Decca
7	2	3	DON'T LET THE STARS GET IN YOUR EYES	S. Willott	Four Star

America's Favorite FOLK Artist



SLIM WHITMAN

THE ORIGINAL

"KEEP IT A SECRET"

published by Shaprio-Bornstein & Co.

b/w

"MY HEART IS BROKEN IN THREE"

published by Valley Hill Music Co.

As McCarthyism threatens the entertainment industries in 1952, confusion between "folk" and "country" is painfully obvious in the pages of Billboard, a leading entertainment trade journal.

Hey hey, the working man, the working man like me,
I ain't never been on welfare, that's one place I won't be,
'Cause I'll be working
Long as my two hands are fit to use.
—Merle Haggard, “Workin’ Man’s Blues,” 1979

The identification of country music as part of the South extends beyond having a blind spot for the importance of California for the music. The mythology of country depends upon a contrived image of the South as inherently conservative, a claim that can easily be contradicted. The widely accepted viewpoint put forward by many country-music scholars is that certain rural and traditional American musicians began to be led astray by the ideological pull of a growing left-wing urban base that yearned for authentic music, particularly in California and New York. In this scenario, this migration of musicians to the coasts and away from their roots in the heartland is what led to the folk-music revival of the 1960s. The case of Woody Guthrie is often cited to support this story, since Woody began his journey in Oklahoma and moved to California, eventually becoming a radio personality in Los Angeles before moving to New York. This perspective accepts the prescribed notion of southern and rural Americans as inherently apolitical, parochial, and complacent, as well as more authentic than people in other parts of the country.

The claim that “real” country music is conservative is not only inaccurate but lends credibility to the caricatures of rural white people portrayed in hillbilly shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71), *Green Acres* (1965–71), *Hee-Haw* (1969–71), and *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–85) as narrowly old-fashioned and ignorant. Proponents of the conservatism of country music often invoke a passive southern and rural people who stand above the conflicts of class and social strife, perpetuating a myth that radical or progressive thought has no tradition in the South and Southwest. In fact, populist and labor movements of southern and southwestern sharecroppers, miners, textile workers, and other working-class and poor people contributed much to the evolution of hillbilly music. Militant labor activity was prevalent in the 1930s throughout the US and the southern mountain regions were no exception, particularly in the mining areas. The campaigns of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), the National Miners Union (NMU), and other miner organizations were pivotal for many in the region, and much of the music expresses this. The struggles of

Appalachian coalminers and the violent strikes of “Bloody Harlan” County in Kentucky throughout most of the twentieth century led to many ballads and country tunes. Aunt Molly Jackson, daughter and wife of Kentucky coalminers and a union activist, sang and wrote many important anthems of the coalmining Appalachian region, as did her sister, Sarah Ogan Gunning, who penned this 1966 song (later revived by the seminal alt-country band Uncle Tupelo):

Oh miner, won't you organize wherever you may be
And make this a land of freedom for workers like you and
me.

Dear miner, they will slave you 'til you can't work no more
And what'll you get for your living but a dollar in a company
store,
A tumbled-down shack to live in, snow and rain pours in
the top.

You have to pay the company rent, your dying never stops.

I am a coal miner's wife, I'm sure I wish you well.

Let's sink this capitalist system in the darkest pits of hell.

The music of miners played a large role in the mountain folk music of Appalachia and that spirit flowed through much of the culture. Even the popular singing cowboy Gene Autry recorded a version in 1931 of the ballad “The Death of Mother Jones,” about the death of one of labor’s most famous union organizers. One of the last “suspect” country hits before the McCarthyite clamp-down was “16 Tons,” the coalminer anthem written by Merle Travis that became the number one hit song in the US when recorded by Tennessee Ernie Ford in the early 1950s.

The IWW, the Knights of Labor, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the Textile Workers Union, the Alabama Sharecroppers Union, and other labor groups were active in the South and in rural areas and led enormous and militant strikes. Professor Tom Tippett, an important on-the-scene observer of southern labor radicalism during the Great Depression, wrote:

The labor storm that broke out in Elizabethton, Tennessee, March 1929, when more than 5,000 rayon makers went on strike against the huge Bemberg-Glanzstoff Rayon Corporation, gathered momentum quickly. In a few weeks 1,700 textile operatives walked out of the Brandon mills in Greenville, South Carolina, and while the newspapers were setting up type for that story, 1,800 other textile workers revolted in Gastonia, North Carolina. Then followed one strike after

another, until the whole Piedmont section, from Greenville to Elizabethton, was dotted with local walkouts. The spectacular Marion strike occurred in July of the same summer. Marion is about halfway between Gastonia and Elizabethton. All told there were around 17,000 or 18,000 textile workers on strike in the spring of 1929. In the fall of 1930 the scene shifted to Virginia with the great uprising of Danville.¹⁰

Like the Appalachian South, Texas and Oklahoma are often painted as bastions of conservatism and social backlash, ignoring a strong tradition of political progressivism that blossomed there and followed the migrants from the Dust Bowl out to California. As the historian James Gregory points out, “in the years immediately prior to World War I, Oscar Ameringer, Kate Richards O’Hare, and Thomas ‘Red’ Hickey had built the nation’s largest Socialist Party membership on the foundation of former Populists. Enjoying the support of thousands of tenant farmers, miners, timber workers, and urban sympathizers, the movement had garnered over a third of the vote in many of Oklahoma’s poorer counties, and substantial numbers as well in western Arkansas and northern Texas.¹¹ In this context, the emergence of Woody Guthrie as an authentic voice of the rural left should be no great surprise. Indeed, the voice of poor, hard-working people struggling against injustice that is the kernel of much of American roots music still provides inspiration to contemporary musicians in other industry-defined genres such as rock and roll, folk, and blues. It is this progressive legacy of country that is still strongly linked to California.

To reconnect country music to the progressive traditions of California is not to suggest that California truly deserves the liberal stereotype frequently attached to it during political campaigns. As the cultivated conservative image of the South can easily be challenged, so too can the progressive mantle of California. California is a microcosm of the nation as a whole, with “red,” Republican, conservative and “blue,” Democrat, progressive counties frequently battling over the ideological future of the state. For many decades, the ideological dividing line in California between left and right was assumed to be between the northern and southern parts of the state, but in recent years the divide has become more strongly defined as between the coastal zones and the inland and mountain areas, pitting the liberal enclaves of Los Angeles and the Bay Area against the Central Valley and Sierra foothills. While demographic shifts in age, suburbanization, immigration, and economic status have

California musicians feel passionate about their views and aims and readily incorporate them into their work.

moved California more toward the “blue” in recent times, the conservative element still has clout, as seen in the 2008 victory of an anti-gay marriage initiative. The contradictions of progressivism and conservatism are evident throughout California history, from the anti-Asian race riots at the beginning of the twentieth century to recent anti-immigrant actions on the Mexico-California border. Though today almost every town in California pays homage to César Chávez in school or street names, and his birthday is a state holiday, while he was alive he provoked hatred among many in the Central Valley. John Steinbeck, the esteemed author of *The Grapes of Wrath*, whose protagonist Tom Joad inspired many country and folk ballads, was a virtual outcast from his hometown of Salinas, California, where they burned his novel on Main Street.¹² Thus, the image of liberal California can never be taken for granted, even though its progressive values continue to show resilience and vitality. It is perhaps because of this ideological clash within the state that many California musicians feel passionate about their views and aims and readily incorporate them into their work.

Though the influence of Nashville grew substantially through the 1960s and 1970s, the influence of the Golden State remained pervasive as country music increasingly entered the mainstream of pop. Perhaps its most successful crossover is indebted to the baritone of the “man in black,” Johnny Cash, with the landmark recording of his concert at Folsom Prison outside of Sacramento. Cash had given many concerts in prisons, including San Quentin, near San Francisco, where one prisoner was Merle Haggard, soon to be his peer. A country superstar, Cash spent much of his time in California. According to his biographer Michael Streissguth, Cash “proved an uneasy guest in the country music house, shirking the control of producers and refusing to settle his family in Nashville, moving instead to the suburbs of Los Angeles.”¹³ Cash joined a large community of country entertainers in California who clustered

around the hayrides, jamborees, and hootenannies filling TV screens across America. Despite the centrality of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry in presenting and recording country music, most Americans received it from the ubiquitous TV tube in the living room. Many country television programs originated from California, from *Town Hall Party* (broadcast from Pasadena, 1951–61) to *The Porter Wagoner Show* (1960–81) to Johnny Cash's series. The wildly successful, "silent majority" alternative to the hit television programs of the late 1960s, *Laugh-In* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was "*Hee-Haw*," a variety show emceed by the singers Buck Owens and Roy Clark. Though the show was a product of performers and writers primarily based in California, the accents, sets, and costumes were all southern. Among the most visible aspects of country entertainment were the quite outlandish glittering rhinestone belts and fringe-jacket outfits of Nudie Cohn, whose tailor shop in North Hollywood outfitted virtually all the great country stars, including Hank Williams, Porter Wagoner, Roy Rogers, and even Elvis Presley.

Many of the country stars from the "golden era" of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s who did remain true to their southern roots had more in common with the progressive vision and values of California than with the rock-ribbed conservatism of the southern Bible Belt. The Queen of Country, Loretta Lynn, sang about how thrilled she was that she had access to the birth-control pill in her hit 1975 song "The Pill." Johnny Cash, who identified strongly with the Cherokee, sang about the plight of the poor, people in prison, and the struggle of the Native American people. Glen Campbell sang "Universal Soldier," a strong antiwar critique of militarism, on national television. The music "outlaws" who emerged in Austin, Texas—Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Townes Van Zandt, and friends—were certainly more tied to California culture than Nashville, with their long hair, marijuana smoking, and anti-establishment attitudes. Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and others of the Bakersfield sound, while marketing their sound through their allegiance to Okie and southern roots, were themselves very tied to the culture of California. According to the scholar of country music Bill Malone, "Manifestations of the revolution wrought by Buck Owens first appeared, appropriately, in California, in the music of Chris Hillman and Gram Parsons who founded the Flying Burrito Brothers and, later in Los Angeles among the 'cowpunks,' young musicians

who brought the aggressive edge, attitude, and high-volume sounds of rock-and-roll to the music."¹⁴ Most of those who observed or participated in the Bakersfield phenomenon attested that Haggard, the Okie from Muskogee, was no stranger to the marijuana that supposedly wasn't smoked on Main Street.

California certainly became far more associated with other forms of popular music, primarily rock and roll. The Doors, the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, the Beach Boys, and other California superbands, with their close association with sex, drugs and the sixties counter-culture, branded California forever in the minds of people across the globe. But country was a strong part even of their sound. Many rock bands incorporated fiddle, slide guitar, mandolin, harmonica, and other old-time instruments into the music. The Grateful Dead did cover versions of country songs, including Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried." The Byrds released "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," a top-selling country-chart hit. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's landmark album, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," brought folk traditions to the burgeoning audience for rock and roll. The California-based singer Linda Ronstadt released no fewer than four top-selling country-music albums and won the 1976 Grammy for best female country vocalist. Creedence Clearwater Revival, whose music evoked the bayou and the sound of street-corner New Orleans, was a band from El Cerrito. Some California punk-rock bands, after an initial fascination with the English punk scene, reconnected with the country sound, recognizing Hank Williams as perhaps the original punk rocker. Country and punk met halfway in the country star Dwight Yoakam, who seamlessly slid back and forth between traditional country and California punk, performing with both Buck Owens and the LA band the Blasters.

California Bloodlines

The country-music establishment today is an enormous industry, dominated by a handful of music conglomerates that control country radio and strive to maintain its "conservative" values. The most notorious recent evidence of this control was the orchestrated attack in 2003 and 2004 (in the run-up to the presidential election) by country-radio stations on the popular band the Dixie Chicks, who were drummed out of the country-music scene after

criticizing their fellow Texan George Bush for the US invasion of Iraq. Most country stars do not need reminders of their conservative obligations and readily play the conservative tune, from the flag-wrapped jingoism of Toby Keith (“Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue,” 2001) to the redneck self-caricature portrayed by Hank Williams Jr. in numerous appearances with Sarah Palin on the campaign trail and in his campaign song “The *McCain-Palin* Tradition.” With Nashville as the capital of country, industry leaders have tried hard to maintain its perceived southern authenticity and country stars are encouraged to exploit any and all ties to the region. The official biographies of Nashville-promoted stars highlight any tidbit, however vague or remote, that establishes some connection to the South, Oklahoma, or Texas, or more generally to a romantic image of rural life—having listened to the Grand Ole Opry as a child, ridden a horse, sung in a church choir, milked cows. Even stars from Canada or Australia must come up with some connection to the American heartland. As the mountain singer and National Heritage Fellowship honoree Hazel Dickens puts it, “They might stick the pick-up truck in there, or a bale of hay in there, or that kind of stuff for one of those singers to sit on, and put a pair of jeans on him and a big hat, but that don’t change a thing, that’s just images.”¹⁵

It is no secret that the United States is an increasingly divided political territory, with polarized “red state” and “blue state” conservative and progressive camps. A rhetorical device long used by the American right wing, most currently represented by Tea Party activists, is that it represents real Americans, the true upholders of patriotism. The tradition of country music as conservative, southern, and hostile to progressive ideas is central to much of that worldview. Country music certainly contains such tendencies, but it is also equally the music of hobos, drifters, rebels, union organizers, agitators, misfits, and outright nonconformists. Country music is in fact the music of Americans everywhere, from not only Texas to Tennessee, but from sea to shining sea.

There has been a resurgence of interest in Americana, in roots music, in alt-country in recent years and California has been central in this upsurge. Among the dozens of community, college, and pirate radio stations broadcasting in

California it would be difficult to find one that did not have some kind of reclaimed country program that tries to program “real” country in place of the conservative and smooth-pop sound of Nashville. At KZFR in Chico and KVMR in Nevada City you’ll hear Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, and Wanda Jackson alongside Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Steve Earle. Today, many bands throughout California are getting back in touch with the roots of country through alt-country bands, community radio, and music festivals such as the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco. String bands, honky-tonk, western swing, and country balladeers can be found from Yreka to Calexico. California country enthusiasts, whether music makers or listeners, can feel comfortable being Golden State country music fans. No other state in the union has a fuller range of the evocative landscapes that have traditionally inspired country musicians. With its fertile valleys and golden plains, deserts and mountains, croplands and orchards, glaciers and shores, rivers and streams, California is indeed “a paradise to live in and see,” as Woody sang. It has a rich history of music and a rich history of social struggle, political protest, and social experimentation—the perfect atmosphere for cultivating a vibrant and inspiring people’s music.

It is worth reconsidering the polarized attitude displayed by two preeminent singer-songwriters with roots in Oklahoma who began their musical careers in California, albeit in different generations. Seemingly at opposite ends of the political spectrum, perhaps they have more in common than we think. Though Woody Guthrie and Merle Haggard have been postulated as ideological opposites in opposing camps of folk and country, we should consider the following lyrics from songs that helped to launch their successful careers.

I worked in your orchards of peaches and prunes,
I slept on the ground in the light of the moon,
On the edge of the city you’ll see us and then
We come with the dust and we go with the wind.

Woody Guthrie, “Pastures of Plenty,” 1936

I can see mom and dad with shoulders low,
Both of ‘em pickin’ on a double row.
They do it for a livin’ because they must,
That’s life like it is in the Tulare dust.

—Merle Haggard, “Tulare Dust,” 1974 **B**

Notes

- ¹ Fred Metting, *The Unbroken Circle: Tradition and Innovation in the Music of Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 58–59.
- ² Personal interview with Utah Phillips, 2007. Bruce U. “Utah” Phillips was a singer-songwriter in the Wobbly (IWW) tradition who was based in Nevada City, CA, for many years. He died in 2008.
- ³ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 98.
- ⁴ Archie Green, *Torching the Fink Books and Other Essays On Vernacular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 16.
- ⁵ Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 39.
- ⁶ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 194. Later still, the name “roots” music was coined in an attempt to bridge this divide.
- ⁷ Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137–39. “Big Rock Candy Mountain” has had several revivals of popularity, most recently on the soundtrack of the Coen brothers’ film *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou*.
- ⁸ Personal interview with Gerald Haslam, 2009. Haslam has written extensively on the Central Valley of California. He grew up in Oildale, CA, home of the Bakersfield sound.
- ⁹ Gerald W. Haslam, *Workin’ Man Blues: Country Music in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 82.
- ¹⁰ Thomas Tippet, *When Southern Labor Stirs* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931), 1.
- ¹¹ James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 158.
- ¹² Jay Clarke, “Salinas in Steinbeck’s Steps,” *Orange County Register*, Nov. 7, 2009, Travel Section.
- ¹³ Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2004), 27.
- ¹⁴ Bill C. Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 164–65.
- ¹⁵ Personal interview with Hazel Dickens, 2009. Dickens is a traditional mountain singer from West Virginia. In 2001 she was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship for her contributions to American musical culture.