

URBAN COWBOYS

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In America, it took thirty years for country music to acquire an acceptable commercial image. It was only in the late seventies that major radio stations began switching to country, and the focus switched from 'red-necks' to 'urban cowboys' — from truck drivers to lawyers in cowboy boots. Over here it is still a despised minority interest, still occupying the same strongholds in the North and in Ireland. Every Easter, the fans make the annual pilgrimage to the International Festival of Country Music at Wembley, patiently accepting the over-priced tickets, atrocious sound system, and a four day diet of ersatz Southern friend chicken.

The promoter of the festival, Mervyn Conn, presents himself as a champion of home-grown talent. This allows him to pad the bill with mediocre English and Irish country acts (saving on both salaries and air fares) while the audience waits six hours for the American headliners to appear.

The stars are what have kept the festival going, but this year they are conspicuously absent. Johnny Cash and Tammy Wynette have been replaced by Kris Kristofferson and a host of second division performers like Marty Robbins. There are none of the great ladies of country, and the only legends are

Jerry Lee Lewis and Roy Orbison, who both come from rock and roll. Now that country music has been adopted into the American mainstream the stars can command higher prices and better conditions, and this is a sign of how Nashville itself has changed.

Country music made its first national breakthrough with Hank Williams in the fifties, but it was still music for hicks. It was naive, vulgar, sentimental and its performers had no concept of 'good taste'. It was 'music by poor people for poor people', just like soul, and went in for the same kind of tinselly display. Sequined cowboy suits, white Cadillacs, party gowns and fantastic wigs — the style of performers who came up from nothing and wanted to show what they had.

In the sixties, when college students were discovering the blues and every other type of ethnic American music was being reverently examined, country was despised for different reasons. The South meant racism, hawks on Vietnam, the Klan and the rednecks who shot the heroes in *Easy Rider*.

Country music is the only white, working class music America has, and the Left has never come to terms with a grass roots music that is deeply, resentfully conservative.

Merle Haggard offers the perfect illustration. The son of poor Okies who moved to Texas during the depression, he was born in a boxcar that his father had converted into the family home: he had a background out of a Woody Guthrie song, and unlike Guthrie, was not a drifter by choice. Haggard is one of the very few musical outlaws who has actually spent time in jail, and he was in the prison audience the day Johnny Cash played San Quentin.

It was the perfect material for a romantic legend. In the sixties, the folk audience discovered songs like *I'm A Lonesome Fugitive* and *From Now On All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers* and began to celebrate Haggard as one of Guthrie's heirs. Then he released *Okie From Muskogee*. A song written in twenty minutes in a jokey spirit in the back of a tour bus, it became an anthem for blue-collar resentment against draft-dodgers, beatniks, hippies and all the weird changes taking place in the USA. The song won the top country music awards that year, made Haggard a major star, and lost him his student following. It wasn't till the memory of Vietnam had faded that Haggard was accepted outside of country music as a modern folk hero.

Haggard is not a professional patriot; he has never voted and avoids any political involvement. But he was the voice of Middle America, working class bitterness during the Vietnam era, of men who hated the way God and country had come under attack, but felt equally betrayed by the government. Haggard also reveals the mean-spiritedness of country music. In *I'm A White Boy* he sneers 'I don't live in no ghetto' — blacks become the scapegoat for the poor Southerner's bad

Merle Haggard



Waylon Jennings



Channel Five

times. But mixed with this is the spirit of *A Working Man Can't Get Nowhere Today* and *Big Country*, that the old values of hard work, duty and patriotism just don't pay off:

I'm tired of this dirty old city
And tired of too much work and never enough play
And I'm tired of this dirty old sidewalk
Think I'll walk off my steady job today.

Turn me loose, set me free, somewhere in the middle of Montana
Give me all I've got coming to me
And keep your retirement and your so-called social security
Big city turn me loose and set me free.

There are two ways of looking at country music. You can judge it on its attitudes, or for how clearly it reflects how its audience thinks and feels. As long as it was a closed market, with a clearly marked audience, it had to be responsive to its fans in a way that the mainstream wasn't. It gave women, in particular, a voice. Loretta Lynn said 'I know what it's like to be pregnant and nervous and poor'. Neither she nor Tammy Wynette nor Dolly Parton conform to feminist guidelines. Their songs were autobiographies: they made their lives public and gave a woman's experience a value and a place in popular music, firmly placing themselves as an alternative to the male point of view.

In the mid-seventies it was the 'outlaws' — Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson — who, with their long hair, denims, drug references and liberal image, brought country to a young, hip audience. They loosened up country, but at the same time introduced a soft-focus Hollywood romanticism, worthy of The Eagles or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. In this world, outlaws are cuddly, bullets don't hurt, and women are infinitely tolerant, easy lays:

'She's a good-hearted woman in love with a good timin' man
She loves him in spite of his ways that she don't understand.
He likes the bright lights and night and good timin' friends
And when the party's all over she'll welcome him back home again.'

Nashville saw the market opening, and cleaned up its act. The advantage was that black performers were allowed (grudgingly) onto the Grand Ole Opry stage; the disadvantage was that in order to move upmarket it became tastefully, comfortably unreal. With Kenny Rogers, it moved into easy listening. As country stars were accepted on television they began packaging their own past: Loretta Lynn appears with George

Burns, smiling bewilderedly as she is led through a rehearsed, Daisy Mae routine.

Norman Mailer once said that America 'murders its writers and then lays wreaths upon their graves'. But America has gentler ways of destroying its culture: in this case by offering four weeks in Las Vegas and a spot

on the Johnny Carson show. Nashville still pays service to the country audience while the record companies set their eyes on a bigger and better market. Meanwhile the fans will turn up at Wembley with their six-guns and cowboy hats, ready to pay homage and wondering where the stars have gone.