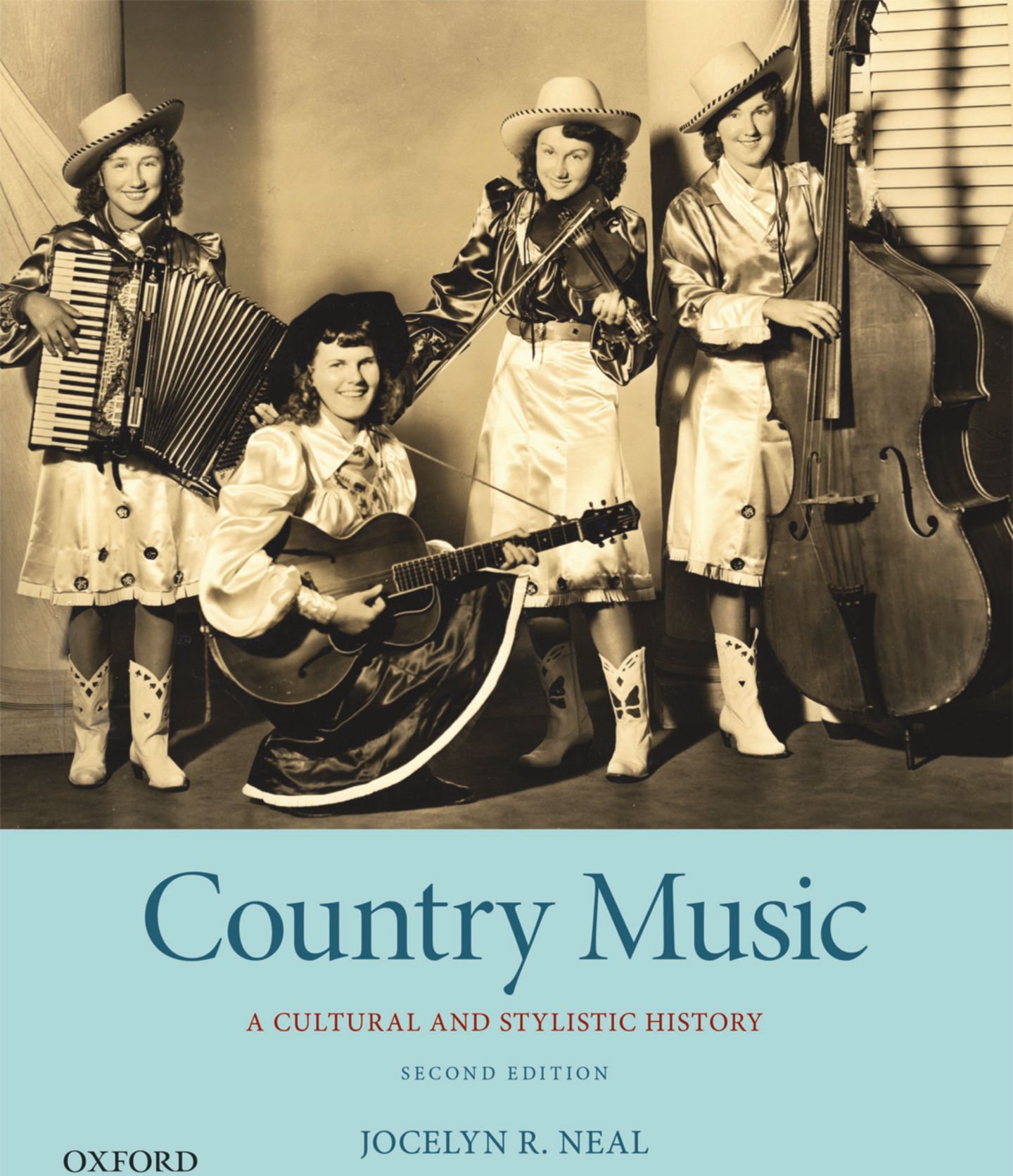

Country Music

A CULTURAL AND STYLISTIC HISTORY

SECOND EDITION

JOCELYN R. NEAL

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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New York Oxford

Oxford University Press

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Neal, Jocelyn R., 1973-author.
Title: Country music : a cultural and stylistic history / Jocelyn R. Neal.
Description: Second edition. | New York : Oxford University Press, [2018]
Identifiers: LCCN 2018018243 (print) | LCCN 2018018428 (ebook) | ISBN 9780190908751 (ebook) | ISBN 9780190499747
Subjects: LCSH: Country music–History and criticism. | Country musicians. | Country music–Political aspects. | Country music–Social aspects.
Classification: LCC ML3524 (ebook) | LCC ML3524 .N42 2018 (print) | DDC 781.64209–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018018243

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by LSC Communications, Inc., United States of America

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Preface

This book has grown from two seeds: one is a deep passion for country music of all stripes, styles, eras, and varieties; the other is an insatiable curiosity to understand the music, from the notes, rhythms, and words of the songs to the very human performances, the music's endlessly varied meanings, and what it can teach about history, about culture, and about the essence of human relationships. The book offers a journey through a century of country music, presenting information about the music, musicians, fans, and historical contexts, along with explorations of several important themes and issues that arise from that study. It is designed either for a one-semester, college-level course on country music or for use with country-music units and topics within the framework of a course on American music or popular music. Individual chapters within the book can also be used in many other contexts to investigate specific time periods, artists, and topics.

Coverage

The book presents a chronological history of the development of country music. It begins with the source materials from which country music emerged, then traces the music from its earliest recordings in the 1920s through the present. The book covers the developments of different musical styles, the evolution of the music industry, and the changing ways that the music relates to popular culture and different historical contexts. It includes information on an extensive number of country stars, songwriters, and industry personnel. It does not, however, attempt to be comprehensive on that front. It will instead give the curious reader the tools, information, and big-picture understanding to figure out how other bands and artists fit into the history of country music, while country music encyclopedias and websites can readily provide basic biographical information about bands and artists not covered in this book.

The main focus of this book is American commercial country music. There are thriving country music scenes in other areas of the world, and some coverage of them is provided here. The main narrative, however, explores the music in its native home. The attention to American commercial country music is an inclusive one: the book covers bluegrass, alternative country, western swing, and many other styles at length, and examines geographic centers far beyond the main production sites.

In the intervening years since the first edition appeared, the field of country music scholarship has expanded, with significant new research by Diane Pecknold, Dene Hubbs, Jeremy Hill, Travis Stimeling, Charles Hughes, Murphy Henry, Lee Bidgood, and many others. I have attempted to weave that new scholarship into the text throughout the book so that students will have access to the most contemporary ideas possible. This expansion of scholarship on country music is exciting, and students at all levels should be encouraged to reach beyond this textbook.

Approach

As explained in the Introduction, the book focuses on three interpretive themes that run throughout the history of country music: cultural identity; authenticity; and otherness, specifically the ways in which country music remains distinct from mainstream popular culture.

The book carefully and consistently avoids making any arguments about what music is or is not "real" country, and instead takes the stance that the student of country music should ask questions about "how" and "why" rather than merely assign categories. The fastest way to stall one's learning is to declare a song "country" or "not," or a performance "authentic" or "not." Asking students to think beyond such binary judgements will lead to far more insight and understanding. Individual instructors and students will have varying personal tastes for country music, and their interpretations of these issues will encompass many different perspectives. These are to be encouraged and can lead to very insightful class discussions and supplemental research projects.

This course of study can be undertaken from a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to music, history, cultural studies, American studies, English, sociology, and communications. The book assumes no formal musical training on the part of either the student or the instructor. Supplemental materials are included for students in a music discipline or those seeking more technical study of the music itself. These include an appendix on song form and a few musical examples that are not essential to the main body of the book.

Layout

The structure of the book will readily align with a typical one-semester or one-quarter course syllabus. The book is laid out in five parts, each of which covers approximately two decades and features three chapters. Each part begins with a brief overview that presents the major developments covered in the unit and situates them in a broader historical context. Each chapter contains the following:

1. A main narrative that covers the musical and cultural history of one era.
2. Two artist profiles that explore the biographies of key figures.
3. Three detailed listening guides that connect specific recordings to the ideas presented in the chapter. These listening guides form a core component of the book and should be a major part of the student's experience, because they link the ideas and main narratives to the sound of the music.
4. Comparative listening, identified as a "Listen Side by Side" exercise. These exercises guide close readings of two or more songs in relation to each other, where comparisons yield better understanding of the main themes of this book. These also serve as useful stimuli for in-class discussions.
5. Several essays that offer in-depth exploration of a single topic. These essays fall in one of seven categories: history, musical style, the music business, culture, technology, songwriting, and issues of identity (such as race, class, and

gender). For instance, the musical style essays provide definitions and discussions of different musical styles such as western swing or countrypolitan, and the technology essays provide concise discussions of key developments in music technology that have had a major impact on country music. These essays will help students and instructors explore threads in these categories across the whole span of country music and tailor their courses to their specific disciplinary interests.

6. A playlist that suggests additional listening beyond the three songs covered in the listening guides. Together, the listening guides plus these additional playlists offer approximately eight songs associated with the main topics, issues, and ideas covered in that chapter.
7. Suggested sources for additional reading.
8. Review materials, including questions that are suitable for class discussion or writing assignments.

Four appendices are also provided. Appendix A is an introduction to song form that covers technical vocabulary and ways to analyze a song's form. These skills are essential to any close reading or analysis of individual songs. Appendix B offers a basic introduction to the instruments commonly heard in country music. Each entry describes the instrument's role in the history of country music and suggests songs where the instrument can be readily heard. Appendix C provides a glossary of key terms. And Appendix D presents a timeline of events in country music history along with touchstone events in American history.

The listening guides that appear throughout this book require some technical explanation. The timings shown for the start of each section align with the first structural downbeat of that section. This approach is consistent throughout the book and matches the accepted methodology for formal analysis of popular music. Students without a formal musical background may think more casually of sections starting with the singer's lyrics, which in many instances may be either pickup notes or after-beat patterns and may therefore occur a few seconds before or after the timing listed in the book. Therefore, students who are not focusing as much on the music-analytic aspects of this subject matter may treat those timings as general guidelines, while students taking a more rigorous approach to the musical analysis and music theory will be able to use them to identify specific structural features of the songs.

Source Materials

Along with this textbook, students will need access to recordings. Students and instructors have a variety of resources at their disposal to help in this task. Listening to the recordings is essential, and students should rely on those recordings as a primary source throughout their study. Students should also consult song lyrics; these are readily available on many internet sites, in liner notes to recordings, and of course through firsthand transcription of the recordings.

Outcomes

The student outcomes for any course in the history of country music are determined by the specific disciplinary approach and course design that the instructor chooses. This book will support a wide variety of learning outcomes, including but by no means limited to the student's ability (a) to recognize by ear many different styles, eras, trends, individual artists, and major themes in country music; (b) to interpret the varied meanings of country music within different historical and cultural contexts; (c) to use country music as the creative lens through which to study different people, cultures, places, and times; and (d) to explain country music's role and identity as a genre within popular culture.

Most of all, I invite instructors and students alike to incorporate this book into their personal explorations of country music. I hope that, in the course of their studies, students will encounter country music they love, country music they hate, country music that confuses them, and country music that inspires them. I encourage them to engage all of that music with a heightened sense of curiosity and critical inquiry. The music has much teach us all about human relationships, history, and culture. Enjoy the journey!

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the many people who have helped me write this book. Richard Carlin guided its creation with his extensive expertise and his own passion for the subject matter. Hannah Whitcher and the publication team of editors were invaluable throughout the publication process.

Thank you to the many reviewers for Oxford University Press who have provided productive suggestions and insights throughout the book's existence.

Colleagues who share my deep interest in country music have offered their own expertise, including Nate Gibson, Joti Rockwell, and Travis Stimeling. Fellow speakers at conferences, including Jewly Hight, Barry Mazor, Jon Weisberger, Fred Bartenstein, James Akenson, Don Cusic, Erika Brady, Diane Pecknold, Russell Johnson, and so many more have stimulated my thinking. The many students who have enrolled in my country music classes over the past decade, served as teaching assistants, and undertaken country music research projects with me have all helped me shape this book, including Christa Bentley, Gina Bombola, Meg Orita, and more. And I am grateful to the professors who inspired me to pursue this path of scholarship in the first place and made such study possible, including Betsy Marvin, Dave Headlam, and John Covach,

I owe the greatest debt to my family for their support of this project. My parents instilled in me a love both of music and of teaching. My children, Caelen, Rhiannon, and Liadan, are the center of my world. They have grown up surrounded by both this music and the research that led to this book. May they follow a pathway in life enriched both by music and by an endless desire to understand both the people and the culture of all the music they encounter. It is to them I dedicate this work.

Introduction: Heading into the Country

What is country music? It is an indelible part of American popular culture, interwoven with our sense of identity and our retelling of history. It is nostalgic, yet focused on the present. Some of it has been called hillbilly music, but at times the music has purged itself of all hillbilly associations. It is rural in origin, yet has always been reliant on an urbanized commercial industry. It is primarily white in terms of its racial and ethnic associations, but inextricably dependent on a range of musical styles with strong racial and ethnic pasts, including black, Cajun, and Latin, and home to diverse artists and audiences. It is extremely popular, yet one of its main concerns is to differentiate itself from what we call pop music. It offers both a window on working- and middle-class life and a punch line for tasteless jokes as old as some of the tunes themselves. Ask five different fans to define it, and you will likely get five contradictory yet equally passionate answers. None of these characteristics produces a clear definition, yet the music's complexity is what makes studying it so rewarding.

Country as Genre

Country music is a **genre** of popular music whose boundaries are determined by the interactions of fans, the commercial music industry, and musicians. "Genre" means category, and this book—along with most studies of popular music—includes the opinions of the music's fans as an important way in which a genre is defined. **Popular music** is the term by which we identify mostly commercially produced and disseminated music that is a common part of its audience's daily lives. Popular music is generally popular (meaning lots of people like it), although some genres within popular music have much smaller fan bases. In the past, music that has not been considered part of popular music has included art music, which is sometimes called classical music, and folk music. Some scholars in previous decades considered art music to be music that was neither a product of nor intended for mass culture, and folk music to be that which was entirely outside commercial enterprise. Art music was described as intellectually cultivated and an expression of high culture, such as a Beethoven symphony. This music was taught in formal music appreciation courses and supported by grants and institutions of higher learning, with the assumption that it was good for people to study it and hear it. Folk music, by contrast, was considered the anonymous music-making that was simply part of oral traditions in local communities and families. It was valued by collectors in the

early twentieth century precisely because it appeared to represent a grassroots, raw expression of regular people's culture.

These distinctions, however, do not hold up to critical examination. In recent years, scholars have explored how some art music is both extremely popular and highly commercial, and how folk music was never really isolated from the forces of commerce, meaning that the songs that people sang in their homes, churches, and gathering places often came from identifiable songwriters, published songbooks, and traceable commercial sources. Thus, any apparent distinctions between popular, art, and folk music, which were never clear-cut in the first place, are even more suspect in the twenty-first century's musical landscape. To further complicate these terms, so-called folk singers such as Peter, Paul, and Mary or the Weavers were very much a part of popular music in the mid-twentieth century, when "folk" became a genre within popular music. For our purposes, we mainly need to understand popular music as that which is created for mass consumption within the commercial marketplace. Popular music includes some art music and is continually interdependent with folk traditions. Finally, the definition of popular music is always closely tied to the cultural identity of its fans: the people who listen to it, the circumstances in which they listen to it, the reasons why they listen to it, and the meanings they find in it.

Different genres of popular music include rock, pop, jazz, blues, hip-hop, rhythm and blues (R&B), gospel, Latin, folk, and country; think of these as the different bins one might have seen in a conventional record store. Thus, we will consider country as one genre within the broad category of popular music. Most music fans listen to and like many different genres. Similarly, individual artists might perform music that belongs to more than one genre. Songs, and even performers, often cross over from one genre to another. These categories we call "genres" are constantly shifting and changing, but there are some characteristics that remain consistent in how we understand them.

One point of potential confusion is that one genre of popular music is commonly called **pop** music. Historically, pop music emerged as the genre most widely accepted by mass culture as represented by a generally (although not exclusively) white middle class. Bing Crosby, Kay Starr, Frank Sinatra, and Rosemary Clooney were all routinely described as pop singers in their day. In later decades, pop music describes a musical genre and performers that have achieved mass acceptance by a young mainstream audience without being subsumed into racially and stylistically differentiated genres such as hip-hop. Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, and Justin Bieber are examples of pop stars.

The relationship between pop and country is particularly complex. For instance, country fans and performers often complain that country music is crossing over into pop, or that a pop star is trying to make country records; at other times, they celebrate the fact that country music is being accepted by a pop audience. The ever-evolving tension between pop and country will form an important part of our study.

Some writers have proposed that musical genres are merely labels that the music industry applies to recordings in order to market them. That perspective, however, relegates fans to a passive role and discounts their power in defining musical genres.

Our approach will instead acknowledge the fans' role in this process. In recent years, record labels have on several occasions packaged a CD as "country" and offered it to the fans, who have resoundingly rejected it on the basis of genre. Conversely, some recordings that sound radically different from most country music have been embraced by fans and accepted as country music, a process that can radically change the genre. And finally, some music that sounds like country is made by musicians and listened to by fans who reject that label entirely. Fans are active participants in how genres are formed and defined, primarily through the ways that they identify and express themselves in relation to their musical preferences.

Definition of Country

Country music, as we will define it in this book, is a commercial genre that claims a lineage from early twentieth-century, rural, white, mostly Southern, working-class popular music. It is symbolically related to the cowboy, and it draws on a largely Protestant, evangelical theology for its underlying philosophy. Its songwriting relies on storytelling; sympathetic, working-class characters; clear narratives; and relatable experiences from everyday life. Stock references such as trucks, cowboy hats, family, small towns, church, "y'all," and countless others often signal a song's affinity with country music. Although its musical sound has changed radically over the past century, it retains associations with certain iconic instruments such as fiddles, steel guitars, banjos, mandolins, and acoustic six-string guitars, although not all of these instruments are present in all styles of country music, nor does their incorporation automatically mean that a recording is country. Country singers and musicians often use Southern vocal accents, verbal interjections, and particular techniques of playing their instruments to differentiate country from other genres. Artists' biographies come into play at various times in the music's history, when a singer's hometown, family, or occupation may be invoked to help define the genre. Country music often situates itself in particular geographic locations: small-town or rural America, the South, Texas, the West Coast. One additional determining factor is whether the people who think of themselves as country fans accept a particular performer or performance music as country.

Our text will address many different musical styles within country music. Musical **style** is difficult to define but refers to those characteristics that can be identified by listening to the music. It describes the particular approach to a performance, the use of instruments, and the musical arrangement, based on what one can actually hear in the performance or recording. It tells us what tradition that performance came from and provides clues as to when, where, and why the recording was made. Think of the country genre as a large umbrella that covers many different styles of music. Over the decades, the styles gathered under that umbrella have changed and evolved so that what we hear today (instruments, type of singing, musical arrangements, etc.) may not sound at all like what we might have heard on a country radio broadcast in the 1920s. Nevertheless, all of those styles come together in the idea of country as a genre, which is a larger category defined by fan identity, traditions, and lineage.

MAIN COUNTRY STYLES WE WILL STUDY

The main styles of country music that we will study include the following. Dates indicate when the style was most prominent; keep in mind, however, that many styles were present for several years before they became widely known, and many styles remained part of country music long after they faded from prominence. The chapters indicate where the main discussion of the style is found.

Hillbilly music	1920s–1930s	chapters 1 & 2
Western swing	1930s–1950s	chapter 3
Singing cowboy	1930s–1940s	chapter 3
Brother acts	1930s–1940s	chapter 3
Honky-tonk	1940s–1950s	chapter 4
Rockabilly	1950s	chapter 4
Bluegrass	1940s–1950s	chapter 5
Country teen crooners	1950s	chapter 6
Nashville sound	late 1950s–1960s	chapter 6
Bakersfield sound	1960s	chapter 7
Country rock	1960s–1970s	chapter 7
Progressive Bluegrass	1960s–1970s	chapter 7
Classic country	1960s–1970s	chapter 8
Outlaw	1970s	chapter 9
Southern rock	1970s	chapter 9
Countrypolitan	1970s–1980s	chapter 10
Neotraditional	1980s	chapter 11
New country	1990s–2000s	chapter 12
Country pop	1990s–2000s	chapter 12
Alt-country (postpunk)	1990s–2000s	chapter 13
Alt-country (retro)	1990s–2000s	chapter 13
Commercial country (roots revival)	2000s	chapter 14
Commercial country (honky-tonk themes)	2000s	chapter 14
Commercial country (Latin influence)	2000s	chapter 14
Commercial country (Southern rock influence)	2000s	chapter 14
Bro country	2010s	chapter 15
Country/hip-hop	2010s	chapter 15

Imagine for a moment that you are flipping through various radio stations. What clues do you hear that help you quickly identify the country station? Your responses might include the lyrics (the words of the songs), the instruments, or the overall timbre (the general description of the sound), which is often described as having a "**twang**." Imagine that you are shopping in a record store. What visual clues tell you which CDs are country? Your responses might include the types of clothing and accessories worn by the stars, the way that the stars are presented in the photography, or the props seen in the photographs and cover art. Imagine that you are attending a concert or a club with live music. What clues identify the genre of the performance? Your responses might include the wardrobe or modes of transportation favored by the audience members, the types of graphics used in advertising posters, or even the name of the venue. In other words, country music has many signifiers in its sounds, visual presentations, and fan identities. As part of our studies, we will examine where these signifiers come from, how they became part of country music, and what they mean, both to country fans and to others.

Is it Real? Issues of Authenticity in Country Music

The biggest issue in scholarship on country music is the idea of **authenticity**. Scholars have written extensively about the topic; many agree that authenticity is a quality or value that fans ascribe to music based on two general considerations. The first is listeners' perception that the music is traditional, "like it used to be," or from a source that is an accepted part of country's roots. In this sense, listeners might describe a performance as authentic if it sounds like country music from some earlier era, or if the fans believe the artists belong to the country music tradition (perhaps through their family's history or biography). The second consideration is listeners' perception of the music as original (as opposed to a copy or facsimile), genuine (as opposed to artificial), and honest. In this sense, listeners might describe a performance as authentic if they feel like the singer is telling a story based on his or her own experience and attempting to connect directly and honestly with the listener without any calculated or constructed mediation. These very complicated and nuanced ideas of authenticity sometimes conflict with each other. Yet together, they help explain how fans continuously make judgments about what is or is not "real" country music.

What passes that test of authenticity will vary from one fan to the next, and from one era to the next, as we will see. Many fans of alternative styles of country claim that the Top 40 country music on contemporary radio is not what they consider "real." Conversely, lots of fans of Top 40 country music are not fond of and do not value alternative styles of country music. In every period in country music's history, contrasting musical styles have existed, and fans have debated their perceived authenticity. Think again about the signifiers we just listed that help define country music. For each of those, there are contradictions, exceptions, and controversies: fans sometimes reject as inauthentic a performance or recording that has many of those

signifiers; in other instances, fans embrace a performance, singer, or recording as country even if it lacks any of those common signifiers. For our purposes, we are not going to concern ourselves with what is or is not "real" country music, even though that is a debate into which music fans often enter. Frankly, asking whether or not a particular artist or song is "real country" is a question that leaves us dead in the water and teaches us nothing. Our task, as students and historians, is instead to study how and why these differences of opinion occur, what they mean in the larger history of the music, and how they help us interpret culture and meaning.

Goals and Themes

Our study of country music focuses on two main goals:

1. to understand the music's history.
2. to identify country's major musical styles and trace their development by ear.

The history of country music includes its important singers, songwriters, business practices, cultural institutions, and songs, all within social and cultural contexts. Most of our study will focus on those contexts as they occur in American history, although we will also examine the export, import, and influence of country music in foreign locations. Country music is a useful window through which to revisit the cultural history of the past century. The Great Depression, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Cold War, conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, periods of economic upheaval, the changing face of American life, technological advances, new media, new forms of entertainment and communications, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and countless other global events and cultural milestones are reflected through the lens of country music. Similarly, country music has acted as a voice for different marginalized populations throughout the past century, offering those groups a chance to be heard. To that end, this study of country music is really a study of history viewed through country music.

Our second goal, which is to be able to identify country's major musical styles by ear and trace their development, requires that you immerse yourself in the sounds of country music rather than merely reading about it. Each concept and idea in this book should be reinforced by constant and careful listening to relevant recordings. At the end of this study, you should be able to listen to just about any country music recording and identify the general musical style, the time period, and the historical or social context in which it was made.

This book is constructed around three primary themes:

1. Cultural identity
2. Authenticity
3. The "otherness" of country

These themes provide a framework through which to interpret the information we have about country music. Think of them as a lens that you can use to examine the music and its cultural context. The question is never whether these themes can be applied to country music of a particular style, era, or artist (they are always

applicable), but rather how you can use these lenses to make sense of the details and musical specifics of that style, era, or artist.

Cultural Identity

Both performers and fans have used country music to express who they are and to give a voice to their frustrations, goals, passions, concerns, and fears. Country music's content and meaning are often linked to its performers' and listeners' economic and social status, class, race, ethnicity, gender, political beliefs, religious beliefs, fields of employment, and family status. The fans and performers represent the full range and diversity of identities within any of these categories. That explains, for instance, how one performance can take on very different and even contradictory meanings for different listeners. Identity, namely who is making and listening to the music, the circumstances and major concerns in their lives, and the social, economic, political, religious, and historical contexts through which they are connecting to country music, will be a major focus of our investigation.

Authenticity

Scholars, fans, and performers alike have focused on authenticity as the most important value that listeners ascribe to country music. What it means, however, varies from one listener to the next, and from one moment or song to the next. We will see how the genre depends on fans and performers at any given time agreeing on what seems "authentic," whether it is a revival of an old style or—totally different—an emphasis on new songs written by the singer, or something else altogether. Competing definitions of authenticity also explain different scenes, movements, or styles within country music, why one group of fans heads to a bluegrass festival and claim that is authentic, while another group of fans heads to a stadium to hear a concert headliner sing songs that they feel they "relate to." Sometimes authenticity means abandoning or at least hiding any desire to achieve commercial success. Consider that in the minds of some fans, being an authentic artist and wanting to sell records are incompatible ideas. At the heart of this paradox, country music came into existence as a commercial music, but has always cultivated the notion that it eschews commercial success.

The best way to study how authenticity functions within country music is to discard entirely any urge you have to label some music as authentic and some other music as inauthentic. Rather than declaring what you think is or is not authentic, ask yourself how and why a group of fans relate in a particular way to an artist or song.

The "Otherness" of Country

Through a variety of ways, country music continuously differentiates itself from other genres, most significantly pop music. In order to maintain its distinction from pop, country music has to be noticeably different from the mainstream. At the same time, many forces within the country music industry push the genre toward mainstream acceptability and larger audiences, which simultaneously increase country's popularity and decrease its distinctive identity. Therein lies the problem: if country music gets too popular and acceptable to the mainstream

audience, it literally becomes pop music. But if country becomes pop music, it no longer enjoys a unique identity as something different than mass, mainstream culture, and its very existence as a genre is threatened. Its "otherness," therefore, is the ways in which it remains culturally marginalized and noticeably different from mainstream pop. Being different can be both an asset and a liability. Throughout this book, we will trace the way the music has sometimes blended into the cultural mainstream, thereby diluting its distinctive identity, and at other times amplified its differences. We will also consider why fans and musicians consider this issue vitally important to country music.

Situating a Performer

This book does not offer a comprehensive catalog of all significant country musicians. Such a collection might well be impossible, although there are some encyclopedias, websites, and books about the history of country music that come close. Instead, this book provides a framework for understanding the major trends, developments, and issues within the genre. Bands and artists generally appear in this text when they are either innovators in an area or style that had lasting impact or representatives of a larger development. The literal constraints on the size of this book mean that many interesting, influential, and important musicians are not covered directly. It is possible—or even likely—that your favorite artist might not appear. Rather than be disappointed if your favorite band or artist is not featured in the book, consider instead that by the end of your studies, you will have the tools and knowledge to do further research on those bands or artists and to make sense of how, where, and why they fit into the larger history of the genre.

How to Listen

Listening to music is easy to do. Most of us listen casually almost all the time for pleasure, to accompany to other tasks, or as a means of socializing. But listening to music as part of a serious study requires a different approach. Recordings will be our main source materials, and we have to treat the listening experience as a focused task that deserves our full attention and significant time. Each chapter includes listening guides and a playlist, which should be studied as carefully as the text itself. And each chapter includes a "Listen Side by Side," which guides you through a detailed comparison of two or more recordings. Let these recordings be your primary texts; study and "read" them as closely as possible, as they are the focal point of this history.

Every country recording invites three layers of listening:

1. The first addresses the song as a text consisting of both music and, in most instances, lyrics. Hank Williams's "Your Cheatin' Heart," for instance, has some words, a tune, and some chords that together comprise that particular song.
2. The second layer addresses the recording as a particular performance from a specific time, place, and set of circumstances. The singer's voice (if there is a singer) is unique; the choice of instruments (including additional voices)

is part of that performance. Those instrumentalists are using different techniques, improvising (creating on the spot) particular harmonies or short musical enhancements for that one performance, and blending in ways that create an identifiable musical style. Each performance uses a specific arrangement of the song, meaning which verses or sections are included, omitted, or repeated, and with what chords and musical parts, harmonies, and enhancements. No two performances, even with the same musicians and the same song, are identical. All of these aspects of the performance are important in our listening comprehension.

3. The third layer addresses the mediation of the recording itself—in other words, the technology involved in capturing, manipulating, reproducing, and delivering the sound to our ears. When we listen to early-1920s recordings made on wax-coated discs without the benefit of electric microphones, for instance, we hear vestiges of that recording process. The same song recorded in a modern, digital studio with sound-processing software such as Auto-Tune will sound very different. Again, these aspects of the recording itself are essential to our understanding of the music and its context and meaning.

In order to get the full benefit from listening, make sure you are hearing the specific performance or version of the song described in this book. In other words, we are not listening just to the words and melody of a song, but rather to the whole performance, with all three layers, to find out what it can tell us about the people, place, time, and traditions in which that performance took place.

The Listening Methodology Chart suggests a strategy for approaching a recording in all three layers. When you listen to music, make sure you have the best possible speakers or headphones, a quiet space, time to play the music several times, and a way to take notes on what you hear. You may not be able to write down some features of the recording such as the melody and chord progression (the actual notes being played and sung), because these skills require advanced, specialized training. However, you will still be able to describe some features of those musical elements. As you listen, think about comparisons between the recording and the other music you know. If you hear two versions of the same song, what has changed, and what is the same? If you hear two different songs in the same general musical style, what do they have in common? By the end of the semester, you will have a large catalog of country music recordings in your head that you can use to understand large trends, developments, and significant changes over the entire history of the genre.

The recordings that we have represent only a tiny fraction of the country music that has been performed over the past century. For every record that we can hear, a performer may have played dozens of concerts live, sung privately with friends, and rehearsed hundreds of other songs for which there is no extant record. While it is essential to acknowledge this, we should also be grateful that we get to hear as much music from the past century as is now possible, particularly with the increasing access to reissues of older recordings and the easy accessibility through the internet to current artists' music. Thus, our study pays tribute to the technology of sound recording and how it contributes to our access to the past.

Listening Methodology		
The Song	**The Words**	**What do they mean?**
		How do they sound?
		How are they organized?
	The Melody	**What does it sound like?**
		How is it organized?
	The Chords	**What is the chord progression?**
The Performance	**Musical Style**	**What is the sound of the ensemble?**
		What is the arrangement of the song?
	The Singer	**What does the voice sound like?**
		What performance techniques are used?
The Recording	**How was the sound captured?**	**What were the conditions where the recording was made?**
		What technologies were used in the recording process?
	How is the sound delivered?	**What technologies were used in creating the final product?**

	What is the story about?
	What allusions or references are in the words?
	What interesting vocabulary is used?
	What poetic devices are used?
	What is the form?
	What is the rhyme scheme?
	What words, phrases, or sections repeat?
	What is its range (how high and low does it go)?
	What are its rhythms and contours?
	Does it quote or borrow from other sources?
	What is the form?
	Do phrases or sections repeat?
	What chords are used, and does the progression borrow from other sources?
	What instruments are used?
	Are there identifiable instrumental techniques from a particular place or time?
	What rhythmic patterns or groove are used?
	What are the musical roles of the different instruments?
	What mood is conveyed?
	What is the overall organization and form of the song as performed?
	Is the voice smooth or raspy, high or low? Does the singer use vibrato or a straight tone? Is the sound pinched or resonant?
	Does the singer talk, yodel, use a regional accent, or sing flat?
	Is there audience noise from a live performance? Are there other audible hints of the setting or location?
	Is there evidence of electronic microphones? Multi-track recordings? Overdubbing?
	Is the recording stereophonic or monophonic? Are there audible effects added to the sound such as reverb or Auto-Tune?
	Are there uncorrected mistakes, tape hiss, cracks and pops, or other audible indicators of old recordings?

Getting Started

There is a certain irony in undertaking an academic study of country music, given that country music touts its own simplicity, transparency, and accessibility. For many years, the study of country music was seldom approached in any academic setting; only in the past decade has it become widely accepted in colleges and universities, and even today some institutions have yet to embrace it. One might even wonder whether the scholarly tools of critical analysis or of historical and social interpretation can be fairly applied to country music. The answer is "yes," and the results of investigating country music from an academic perspective are rewarding. We have a responsibility, however, to consider carefully the cultural context where the music resides.

Part of our responsibility is to be aware of the prejudices, personal tastes, and preconceived notions that we all bring to the subject. Reflect on your own assumptions about the genre: for some students, country music is deeply personal and closely connected to their sense of identity; for others, it is something that is never taken seriously on its own but that stands as a foil for other genres. What we want to do is move beyond our preliminary assumptions while simultaneously trying to understand different points of view about the music. We can never transcend our personal perspectives entirely, but the more aware we are of them, the better equipped we are to explore contrasting interpretations and attempt to understand the music's many facets of meaning.

In this course of study, you will probably hear some music you like and some music you dislike. However strong your responses in either case, remember that it should not matter if we love or hate the music; our goals are neither to like it nor to defend its aesthetic value. Try to concentrate on learning everything you can from each recording, each historical era, and each event or performance that we will examine. There is a vast world of country music that promises rich rewards for anyone willing to undertake its study.

PART I

The Early Years (1920s and 1930s)

Fans love "firsts": the first country recording, the first disc to sell a million copies, the first star to achieve national fame. Historians, however, know that the any such claims are bound to tell only part of the story. Whenever we discover a "first," we should immediately think, "Yes, but what came before?"

The year 1923 marks the beginning of country music as a genre, but the country music backstory begins well before then, when the source materials, traditions, and audiences were already connecting through music that would come to be known as country. Not until 1923, however, did the formula for an identifiable genre come together, and even then, it was not recognizable as country through the same criteria we might use today. Country music came into existence when the commercial music industry captured the soundscape of a particular audience: working-class people, mostly but not exclusively white, in the Southern United States, in rural communities of the North and Midwest, and in the immigrant and migrant communities of the Southwest and West Coast. All of those populations had rich and diverse musical traditions that, up to that point, had been largely overlooked by the urban, industrial forces of culture that were shaping twentieth-century America. Over the subsequent two decades, this music came to represent a significant slice of American identity. By the time World War II broke out, country music was an established genre that included a broad array of musical styles, a well-supported business infrastructure, and two full generations of stars.

The first two decades of country are characterized by a lack of musical coherence. Its sounds included string bands, fiddlers, singers accompanied by guitar, harmonica wizards, and family groups singing and playing everything from traditional ballads to folk tunes, pop standards, cowboy songs, gospel hymns, and blues. Record executives were often dumbfounded when these recordings sold in impressive numbers, particularly because in many cases they neither cared for nor understood the music. Radio stations were primarily local and regional businesses that programmed a wide variety of musical styles and featured live, local performers. Within this early scene, there were no clear boundaries as to what was or was not country music. In fact, the main unifying characteristic of this music

was the biographies of the performers. Country music, which at the time many people called "hillbilly music," functioned as a catchall category for performances by mostly white, mostly rural and Southern, working-class musicians intended for a similar audience. Thus, from its earliest years, aspects of identity through race, region, and class helped define the music.

During its formative years, country music was also heavily shaped by the social context and economic conditions of its audiences. In the 1920s, record numbers of farmers left their former occupation, moved to urban locations, and joined the industrialized labor force. This shift gave them both increased purchasing power and a desire to hear music that reminded them of homespun rural traditions. Conversely, new technologies such as radio stations gave rural Americans unprecedented access to professional entertainment. Furthermore, World War I had primed audiences for new forms of commercial music. During that war, many working-class Southerners ventured far from home for the first time through military deployment. Soldiers served in Hawaii and Europe in large numbers, and after the war returned home with an expanded cultural outlook. They were interested in hearing new musical styles and, at the same time, increasingly nostalgic for the sounds that represented home. This desire for both new and old paved the way for the success of early country stars.

The stock market crash in October 1929 launched a decade of economic woes for most country music fans. During the subsequent Great Depression, many forms of commercial entertainment experienced substantial growth as people sought affordable reprieves from the bleak outlooks in their daily lives. Country musicians were especially successful in this regard because they voiced a deep empathy for working-class life. Country musicians provided accompaniment for dancing, soundtracks for wildly popular Hollywood westerns, comfortingly familiar Saturday night radio shows, musical assurance of gospel salvation, and a whole lot of hell-raising fun along the way, all of which was welcomed by Depression-era audiences.

Country music was commercial music from its outset, a point that cannot be overstated. In the early 1920s, record executives sought new and different music to boost flagging record sales. Radio executives needed entertainment that would draw a loyal audience and thereby enable them to sell lots of advertisements. Publishers and record producers were motivated by their ability to make money from the royalties guaranteed by copyright law (see Chapter 2). Performers and songwriters were interested in getting paid, and for many of them, working as a professional musician was far more palatable than their other employment options. Together, these forces led to the creation of a genre out of a large collection of musical traditions. These commercial considerations did not undercut the artistic motivations of performers or songwriters, nor did they detract from the fact that fans loved the sound of the music and heard it as deeply authentic, a word that always demands careful and critical investigation.

Although many fans associate country music with the South, its geographic origins are far more widespread. The South, including its urban centers of Atlanta, Charlotte, Nashville, was a critical site in the development of the music, but it was not alone. The songwriting and recording industry centered in New York provided key opportunities in the early days, and Chicago, home to a large population of

Appalachian migrants, was a vibrant site for radio and records alike. In California, Hollywood's stars of the silver screen such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers became celebrated musical heroes who introduced a cowboy image and fresh songs to country music, and Texas was an important crucible.

While the links between country music and American folk traditions of ballads and fiddle tunes are strong, country drew on a host of other musical styles. In many instances, the sources of those songs were professional film-score composers or other musicians whose backgrounds involved advanced formal musical training. Jazz music and various European traditions of folk music both worked their way into the dance music that spread across the Southwest and became known as western swing. New microphone technology allowed country singers to imitate the sophisticated popular crooners of the day and abandon the nasal, harsh vocal styles that had characterized much of the first generation of country records. By the late 1930s, the sound of country recordings, along with the instrumentation and the images associated with the performers, was radically different than it had been at the genre's start.

Some fans and performers resisted every change within the genre. Drums and electrified steel guitars, for instance, seemed practical to the musicians who were playing for rowdy, inebriated crowds in Southwestern dance halls, but partisans of the string bands in the Southeast decried their usage. Even while musicians coast to coast were adopting cowboy attire and naming their bands with western slogans, other stars claimed that cowboys were invading and threatening country tradition. Some record producers wanted performers to keep their sound as old-fashioned as possible, even when the musicians wanted to sing more pop songs. By contrast, radio executives sometimes accused bands of being too twangy, traditional, folksy, and hard-edged for their shows. These differences of opinion have persisted in country music to the present day. Even in these first two decades of country music, we see that one consistent characteristic of country music is that its sound, image, and social meaning are, in fact, constantly changing.

By the beginning of World War II, what had started as the happenstance recording of some rural Southern musicians had grown into a well-defined, thriving commercial genre of music. Several radio barn dances achieved national syndication, record sales persisted even through the Great Depression, and country music adopted the cowboy as its lasting, heroic, iconic image. Country music drew together many different musical streams and wove them into a musical genre that was both a thoroughly modern commercial product and a celebration of a rural, idealized past. It was poised to become a national phenomenon, ready to be exported around the globe by American servicemen and women and celebrated at home as part of the quintessential American identity.

1

The Birth of Country Music

The elements of country music first came together in the early 1920s to create the new genre. All of the contributing elements existed before then, but it was their intersection during a unique time in American history that led to the emergence of country music. The five main elements that contributed to this new genre's formation were:

1. Diverse sources of music in the lives of working-class Americans
2. New technologies to deliver the music
3. Audiences eager to hear the music
4. The business structure of a music industry
5. Talented performers

These elements also contributed to the formation of other genres, most significantly jazz, during the same years. The beginning of country music also coincided with dramatic changes in commercial entertainment in general, and therefore many of the ideas and elements we will examine apply to these larger developments, as well.

These innovations took place during the 1920s, a decade when Americans were enjoying newfound prosperity after World War I. New technologies transformed people's lives across all economic classes: the automobile revolutionized transportation, record players became accessible even to working-class families, radio broadcasts brought music and news from faraway places into homes, and increased industrialization changed employment patterns in formerly rural populations. All of these developments fostered connections between rural families and urban communities. The basic principles of a capitalist economy drove all of these changes: record labels wanted to sell records, radio stations wanted to sell advertising, companies wanted to sell their products, musicians wanted to earn a living playing and singing, and people everywhere wanted gainful employment and to enjoy a better quality of life.

Understanding these five key elements, how they developed, and how they joined together to form country music will be the main focus of this chapter. Let's examine them one by one.

Musical Sources

Country music drew from many different sources of music in its early days. These included:

- traditional ballads
- cowboy songs
- fiddle and dance tunes
- gospel hymns
- blues
- jazz
- popular songs written for the vaudeville stage
- minstrelsy

The oldest of these musical sources were the traditional ballads, or songs that told a story, that had been passed down orally from generation to generation. These ballads have long been romanticized as folk songs originally from the British Isles, preserved in pristine form in the isolated mountains of Appalachia.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, song collectors traveled to that area to collect and compare these ballads. The best known of these is British folklorist Cecil Sharp (1859–1924), who spent two years from 1916 to 1918 collecting and transcribing British ballads in collaboration with Maud Karpeles (1885–1976) in the Appalachian Mountains. During that same era, Olive Dame Campbell (1882–1954) was working with her husband in the region and also collected songs. Sharp and Campbell published their findings in several different books, the best known of which was the jointly authored *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1917). This book made available both the words and the melodies for several hundred folk songs, most of which the authors traced back to old British and Scottish ballads. "Barbara Allen," which several early country singers recorded in the 1920s and '30s, is the best known of these. Many of the first generation of country singers recorded songs from this tradition, although they became less common in subsequent decades. What was important, however, was that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, these folk song collectors raised public awareness of the rich musical culture of the Southern Appalachians.

Along with the Appalachian ballads, cowboy songs also gained wider recognition because of the work of collectors and folklorists who were working in the American West at the same time. N. Howard "Jack" Thorp (1867–1940) collected the first book of cowboy songs in his 1908 volume *Songs of the Cowboy,* although it contained only lyrics and no music. Two years later, John Lomax (1867–1948) published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* with both lyrics and music. Many of these songs were collected from working cowboys, and a few could even be traced to earlier British Isles sources, but some were composed by songwriters who were not cowboys but were merely writing lyrics depicting the American frontier. All of these traditions would persist in country music, and in the 1930s, the American cowboy would become a dominant image for country music.

A third significant source of musical repertory for early country performers was the fiddle and dance tunes that had become standards for community entertainment. Many of these started out as songs or ballads with words, but those words were discarded over time as the tunes became popular for dancing, such as "Turkey in the Straw," "Sallie Gooden" (sometimes spelled differently), "Soldier's Joy," and "Sourwood Mountain" (see Listen Side by Side). Fiddlers sometimes accompanied themselves by tapping their feet to create a rhythmic pattern. In the mountains of the Southeast, banjo players often played with the fiddlers at dances and community gatherings. Many cities held fiddle contests, and the winners were widely acclaimed. Atlanta's famous annual fiddle convention began in 1913, but others, in places such as Virginia, are documented as early as the mid-eighteenth century. All of these traditions brought fiddle and dance tunes into common usage in small towns and rural communities.

Gospel hymns provided an extensive source of music for the early days of country. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, a religious fervor swept across the nation. Traveling preachers hosted revivals and camp meetings across the American South, which included congregational singing. A new style of hymn, which emphasized repeated phrases, catchy rhythms, and musical refrains (short melodies that are repeated many times) grew out of this movement. Many composers, such as Fanny Crosby (who wrote "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior") and P. P. Bliss (who wrote "Almost Persuaded"), specialized in this new style.

An entire industry sprang up around these gospel hymns in the early twentieth century. In cities such as Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta, Nashville, and Chattanooga, publishing firms such as R. E. Winsett and Charlie Tillman produced inexpensive paperback hymnals containing newly composed hymns as well as established favorites. A copy with just the lyrics might cost 10¢ or 15¢, while a hymnal with both lyrics and music would be 25¢ or 35¢. Some of the publishing firms, including James D. Vaughan's company, hired professional vocal quartets to tour through the region and perform the hymns as a way of advertising. Other music publishers soon followed suit.

The Vaughan quartets, who went on the road starting in 1910, continued a previous tradition of touring and performing local concerts to advertise music. Earlier related projects included historically black Fisk University's Fisk Jubilee Singers, who toured as a fundraising effort for the Nashville-based university as early as 1871. The Vaughan quartets (Vaughan had, at one point, sixteen different groups touring to promote his music and songbooks) were extremely successful, and have garnered historical significance in some circles as arguably the first musicians to make a country record. Herein definitions of what is and is not country are contested, but the main Vaughan quartet's first recording (1921), a spiritual that the Fisk vocal groups had already recorded multiple times called "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," fits the bill as white, southern musicians singing in a folk-influenced style.

Some editions of these gospel hymnals printed the music in standard musical notation, but the more common editions used **shape notes**, a notation system that used different shapes, such as triangles and squares, for the different pitches in the musical scale. Two different types of shape notes appeared in print: an older, four-shape system, which originated around 1800, and a seven-shape system, seen in Figure 1-1, which emerged several decades later and was quite common among the hymnals that the first generations of country singers used. Traveling singing teachers hosted one- or two-week singing schools throughout the Southern Appalachians where local residents learned to read the shape notes and then took that musical knowledge back to their families and churches. Thus, gospel music was both a thriving industry and an integrated part of daily life for the people who would become the first generation of country singers. Women especially integrated the gospel songs into their daily lives, singing them while tending to children and chores. Many of the performers who became recording stars in early country music knew by heart dozens of gospel songs, such as "I Am Resolved," "Sweeping Through the Gates," and "The Old Rugged Cross," but they also frequently used these published hymnals to learn and perform even more gospel songs.

Listening Guide

"O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie" (1926)

PERFORMERS: Carl T. Sprague (vocal and guitar), with C.R. Dockum (fiddle) and H.J. Kenzie (fiddle)

SONGWRITER: unknown; credited to H. Clemens

ORIGINAL RELEASE: Victor 20122

FORM: Strophic

STYLE: Hillbilly (cowboy ballad)

Carl T. Sprague (1895–1979) was one of the first singers to bring cowboy songs into the emerging genre of country music. He grew up near Alvin, Texas, and worked as a ranch hand, all the while learning traditional cowboy songs from his uncle. After serving in the WWI, Sprague returned to college at Texas A&M (then the Agricultural and Mining College) where he sang on air with the amateur radio club that had been founded on the campus prior to WWI. When fellow Texan Vernon Dalhart found success in 1924 recording old-time mountain songs, Sprague traveled to New York to audition for Victor Records, with his repertory of working ranch hands' traditional cowboy songs. Sprague recorded from 1925 until 1929, but never pursued music full-time. He spent most of his life working at Texas A&M, and also served in the US Army.

"O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," also called "The Dying Cowboy," appears in the many published volumes in the early twentieth century of songs collected from cowboys. It bears many similarities to even older folk songs, most specifically "The Ocean Burial," which starts with the words "O bury me not in the deep, deep sea," for which sheet music dates from at least 1850. The cowboy version was widely known by the end of the nineteenth century. When John Lomax published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910, "The Dying Cowboy" was the first song in the collection, with nineteen complete verses and sheet music, and it also appears in the second edition of N. Howard Thorp's *Cowboy Songs* (1921).

The melody that Sprague sang in 1925 is very close to the one printed in Lomax's book: it has the mournful sound of a lamentation, sung in a minor musical key. The other singers who recorded the song in the 1920s used the same melody. By the 1930s, however, the words were being sung to a different melody, in a major musical key and with a more popular style. In 1939, the classic western film *Stagecoach*, starring John Wayne, used this song with its more pop-style melody as its theme song.

This song also sits at a crossroads of the various forces bringing country music into existence. It was a cowboy song that was present before the cowboy image became prevalent in country music. On the one hand, Sprague has been lauded by some historians because of his personal biography as a working cowboy who learned his songs on a ranch. On the other hand, he cultivated his performance style on a college campus, and traveled to New York to record. For this particular recording, two professional studio musicians were hired to play violins. And the song's widespread legacy came from its use in a Hollywood film. This recording is thus a great starting point to discuss how fans and historians value biography and performance practice in how they understand a particular recording's place in country music.

Sprague sings only six verses from the many that had been collected and published. The presence of the two fiddles is both representative of how common fiddles were in cowboy musical culture (more so than guitars, prior to the influence of Hollywood westerns), and a musical crossover from classical and theater performances, where violins were used for expressive emotional laments.

To a modern listener, this song's strophic form lacks the sort of climax or changes in energy level that we expect from more modern country music. The plaintive performance lacks any of the driving rhythms or even a chorus, which invites us to hear it in the context of its time and place.

Listen Side by Side Suggestion: Johnny Cash, "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," *Johnny Cash Sings the Ballads of the True West* (1965).

TIME	FORM	LISTENING CUES	DISCUSSION
0:00	Introduction	Fiddle, accompanied by guitar	One fiddle plays half of the melody. The guitar plays only a few chords as accompaniment, and there is no driving rhythm.
0:16	Verse 1	"O bury me not. . ."	The first verse introduces Sprague's voice, accompanied only by the guitar. The text begins with a first-person declaration of the refrain, then switches to a third-person narration.
0:44	Verse 2	"He wailed in pain. . ."	Both violins provide subtle accompaniment and harmony here. The text is a third-person narration. Sprague sings the melody the same in each verse throughout the song.
1:14	Verse 3	"O bury me not. . ."	This verse begins with the same declaration as the first verse, which is the title of the song. This opening suggests that it might be a chorus, but the verse then continues with new words. Note that the odd-numbered verses all begin with the refrain.
1:42	Verse 4	"It matters not. . ."	This verse continues in the first-person narration of the dying cowboy. Both violins enter again, and the verse ends with the refrain (title).
2:12	Verse 5	"O bury me not. . .."	This verse advances the plot, recounting the actual burial and death of the cowboy. Here, as in verses 1 and 3, it opens with the refrain, and the violins are silent.
2:41	Verse 6	"And the cowboys now. . ."	The violins re-enter, accompanying only on the even-numbered verses. Note the rather abrupt ending of the song, which was typical in this era. The limitations of the technology meant that long ballads with lots of verses would simply stop at the end of a verse. The lowest note played by the violin at the very end reinforces the mood of the lamentation.

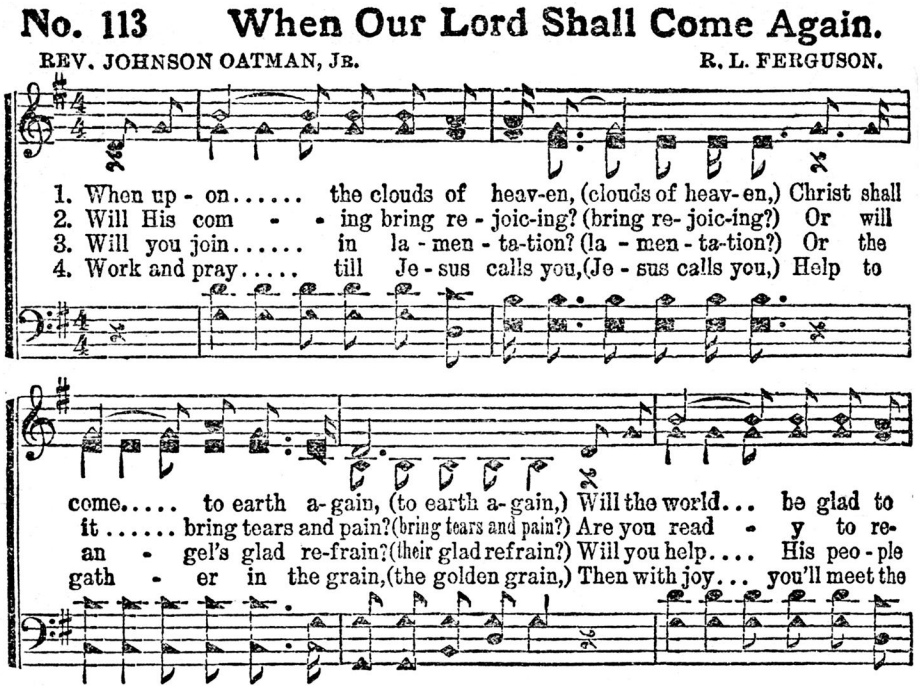

Figure 1-1 An excerpt from a $0.35 paperback seven-shape shape-note hymnal published in 1918 by R. E. Winsett; the Monroe Brothers (see Chapter 2) recorded this gospel hymn in 1938.

Source: Public Domai.

The blues formed an important musical source for early country music. One prominent form of blues music involves African American performers singing short verses (usually a rhymed couplet) over a repetitive chord progression played on guitar (see Appendix A). Sometimes called down-home blues or country blues, this musical style most often had lyrics that bemoaned love gone wrong and that were laced with double entendres or sexual metaphors. While the image of a solitary, introspective bluesman is common in American popular culture, blues performers frequently played for lively, raucous crowds (house parties) and engaged in group performances where each singer would **improvise** new verses in turn. Many other blues traditions influenced country music, including female performers, jug bands (in which a performer blew across the top of a ceramic jug to create bass notes for the ensemble), and ragtime-influenced blues performers. Among working-class Southerners, the blues was not an exclusively African American tradition. Both white and black performers played and sang blues music, and these performances appear frequently among early country music recordings.

The earliest vernacular (folk) music that record companies recorded was blues music. The first black vocal recording of a blues tune, Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" (1920), sold so well that record producers set out to find more blues performers. Those producers launched expeditions to the South, during which they recorded not only black blues artists but also a number of white country artists, thereby contributing to the emergence of the new genre.

Jazz grew out of the popular dance styles in New Orleans, drawing on many of the same musical sources that provided country music's foundation. By World War I, bands had taken the rhythmic patterns from ragtime, added a new element called **swing**, which involved unequal divisions of the musical beat, and used them to devise a new musical genre that emphasized improvisation and came to be known as jazz. By the early 1920s, record labels were recording this new music and distributing it widely. Country musicians heard recordings, and sometimes radio broadcasts, by Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and King Oliver, along with the larger dance bands such as Fletcher Henderson's. The strongest influence of jazz on country music would appear in the early 1930s, but even in the 1920s, country musicians were well aware of the developments in jazz.

Tin Pan Alley was the origin of many popular songs, and it became a major source of music for early country entertainers. Referring specifically to a neighborhood in New York City located between Fifth and Sixth Avenues on West 28th Street, Tin Pan Alley was the nickname given to a group of music publishers who set up shop there in the late 1880s. The term referred to the cacophony of song pluggers (performers hired to advertise new songs) banging out new compositions on pianos as a way of enticing prospective buyers. Those publishing firms employed songwriters who cranked out popular tunes for professional performers, especially stars of Broadway and vaudeville.

Vaudeville was a style of stage show that featured variety acts and whose performing troupes traveled a circuit of theaters, taking their acts from town to town and spreading newly popular songs to their audiences. Many country singers thought of themselves simply as entertainers rather than as belonging to any particular subcategory of country or hillbilly entertainers. As such, they emulated the most popular singers of their day and learned many of their songs from live performances, including vaudeville.

Two additional traditions of traveling stage show, namely **medicine shows** and **minstrel shows**, spread more songs throughout the communities from which country musicians would emerge. Medicine shows flourished from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s. Such shows were run by salesmen with no formal medical training who traveled from town to town hawking elixirs that promised myriad miracle cures. These salesmen hired entertainers to travel with them; when they set up in a town, the musicians would perform to draw a crowd to whom the salesmen could then pitch their wares. Those entertainers mastered the art of holding an audience's attention, and many early country musicians honed their stagecraft while performing with medicine shows.

Minstrel shows first emerged in the early nineteenth century as traveling theater troupes that entertained local audiences with performances of comedy and song-and-dance numbers. By the late nineteenth century, minstrel shows had evolved into a relatively fixed pattern for performances, a particular series of skits, speeches, songs, dances, and humorous dialogue. The performers were in blackface: both white and black actors used burnt cork to darken their faces and hands and present extreme racist stereotypes and mocking caricatures of African-American

identity. The stock black characters that appeared in minstrel shows included Zip Coon, a foppish, dandy character who attempted futilely to put on high-class airs, and Jim Crow, a Southern rural slave character, often singing nostalgically about happy days on a plantation. The dialogue and music mainly represented how northern, urban whites thought Southern blacks sounded, acted, and danced. Many aspects of minstrelsy and blackface performance were abhorrently racist. Scholars have expanded our understanding of the tradition beyond that mere condemnation, however. One common interpretation focuses on the idea of a mask; even black performers in a minstrel show had to "black up" their faces to portray minstrel characters, which suggests that minstrelsy allowed performers to enact transgressive and subversive ideas about class, race, and resentment in public. For instance, while some aspects of the performances involved white entertainers mocking and dehumanizing blacks, other aspects provided a way for both white and black entertainers to push off those negative judgments onto the "masked," artificially blackened characters and thus insulate themselves while offering disguised social commentary on injustice.

Blackface minstrelsy's stock characters and stage practices, which were well known to working-class audiences, provided many of the models on which early country entertainers built their own performances. Blackface skits that relied on supposed Southern black dialects for part of their humor appeared at country barn dances as late as the 1950s. Many early country stars worked as blackface entertainers in their early careers, when they developed many of their onstage skills. And the hillbilly rube character who appears frequently in early country music—an unsophisticated hick who is often surprisingly clever and gets the best of the wiser, more sophisticated urban characters—was extremely similar to one of the stock characters found in the minstrel show. Many of the songs that were very popular among early country singers came straight from the minstrel stage: the fiddle tune "Turkey in the Straw," for instance, was known on the minstrel stage as "Old Zip Coon," and "Old Dan Tucker" had been a favorite minstrel song that subsequently became a country and bluegrass favorite in the early decades of the genre. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that country barn dance programs were essentially minstrel shows in which the performers did not "black up." Country music's indebtedness to minstrelsy radically complicates the racial identity of the music (see Chapter 2) and adds a burden to its history that it still carries to the present.

Drawing their songs from all of these sources and performance traditions, early country singers often passed the songs around orally and learned them by ear, with the result that the songs took on local variations and adaptations along the way. Thus, whatever their origins, by the time country singers recorded them, the songs had become personalized expressions of their performers' own identity.

New Technologies: Records and Radio

New access to sound in the early twentieth century revolutionized the way that middle- and working-class people heard music. Prior to the invention of radio and records, all music was live and only audible in the presence of the musicians. If you

wanted to hear a singer, you had to be in the same place as that singer during the performance. There was no way to revisit that particular performance later or experience it in any setting away from the actual performer. For most people, especially in rural locations, music came from either traveling entertainers or members of the immediate family and community performing for each other.

All of that changed in 1877 when Thomas Edison invented the phonograph. Initially conceived as a way to record speech as either a novelty or as a means to dictate business correspondence, the phonograph used a stylus to transfer sound waves to a rotating cylinder. Many other inventors and rival companies continued the development of sound-recording technology, including, significantly, Emile Berliner, who patented his gramophone in 1887. Instead of recorded cylinders, this device used flat discs, which would eventually become the industry standard. Inventors continued to refine the various machines, and, by the dawn of the twentieth century, the concept of mass reproduction of sound recordings for entertainment purposes was well established. In those years, three record labels, Victor, Columbia, and Edison, successfully tapped into the market for recordings of high-class opera stars, and families across the country began purchasing record players for their homes. By World War I, record players cost anywhere from $15 for a basic model to $175 or more for a high-end player. In 1917, many of the patents that had protected phonograph and gramophone technology expired, which meant that start-up record labels could now compete, and a year later, sales of record players and records topped $158 million. The number of record companies expanded dramatically and, as a result, the major labels, such as Victor and Edison, found their profits increasingly squeezed.

RECORD INDUSTRY TERMINOLOGY

Much of the terminology that surrounds the record industry comes from the technology used in early recording sessions. For many years, recording equipment literally carved the sound waves into wax coatings on discs, which gave rise to the common saying that musicians "cut" or "waxed" tunes. Records consisted of large, flat discs with one song per side, so musicians talked about the number of "sides" they recorded during a particular session, which meant the number of songs.

By 1920, the record industry was near saturation. Too many new labels were competing for audiences, and sales were dwindling. A second factor threatening the economic success of the record labels was the advent of commercial radio broadcasts, which offered people a free alternative for hearing music. These conditions combined to motivate record companies to look for new music and markets. Their first find was blues performers, starting with Mamie Smith who recorded "Crazy Blues" for the OKeh label in 1920. The record's success launched OKeh into the big leagues and sparked widespread interest on the part of other labels to diversify their musical offerings and seek out both black and white musical performers in styles they had previously overlooked. The result was the emergence of both blues and country music as commercial genres, as record producers left the confines of New York City to find untapped talent in remote areas. That climate expanded the record business for country music at an astonishing rate in the early to mid-1920s.

ARTIST PROFILE

Fiddlin' John Carson (1874–1949)

Credited with the first commercial recording of hillbilly music, Fiddlin' John Carson brought old-time mountain music into the bustling, industrial urban south. Popular sources cite his birth year as 1868, but historians have documented that Carson was most likely born March 23, 1874, in Cobb County, Georgia. Carson worked odd jobs in his youth, including a stint as a water boy for black railroad construction crews, and taught himself to play the fiddle. In 1900, he moved his wife and children to Atlanta and took a job with the Exposition Cotton Mills, joining throngs of other migrants leaving the rural mountains to work in the growing cities. Carson was caught in a generation of workers who suffered repressive employment practices within the larger trend toward industrialization. Ironically, Carson's participation in a yearlong strike at the mill fostered his budding career as an entertainer, because it gave him both time to practice and the need to earn money during the strike to provide for his family.

During his years in Atlanta, Carson built his reputation both by busking on the street and through celebrated triumphs at fiddle contests. In 1913, he wrote several ballads about a sensational murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan and the trial of her accused murderer, Leo Frank, which had captured the attention of the entire Atlanta community. Frank, Jewish and from Brooklyn, aroused strident anti-Semitism within the working-class white community in Georgia, who further resented Frank's social position as superintendent of the firm where Phagan worked. Carson captured those sentiments in his compositions and, after a mob lynched the likely innocent Frank, Carson played and sang these songs to the crowds who gathered at the county courthouse.

Carson took home top honors at the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention contests and was frequently celebrated in the local press. By 1922, Carson had put together

Radio had been essentially a research project during World War I, but in the years that followed, it emerged as a wildly popular source of entertainment, especially for families in rural areas. Experimental broadcasts of concerts and sporting events took place in 1919, and by 1920 the first commercially licensed radio station was on the air. Soon thereafter, radio stations appeared across the country. By 1922, there were eighty-nine licensed stations operating in the South. Most were owned by corporations that used the stations as advertising, but in order to get an audience, the stations had to broadcast something that appealed to their prospective listeners. Their typical broadcast schedule consisted of fifteen- or thirty-minute segments of live entertainment, cultural programming, farm reports, and news, with each segment sponsored by a particular corporation or product. By 1930, approximately one out of three homes in America had a radio in it, and families without one often joined neighbors to hear favorite programs.

Radio stations played a crucial role in country music's early years by disseminating country music to an audience eager to hear it and by providing employment to the first generation of professional country entertainers. On March 16, 1922, the

a string band and was earning a significant part of his income through entertaining. His daughter Rosa Lee Carson (1909–1992) joined his act under the nickname "Moonshine Kate," which enhanced their stage image as rural mountain folks.

Already a local celebrity, Fiddlin' John Carson performed on Atlanta's WSB station on September 9, 1922, as part of a Saturday night variety program. Fan mail poured in, and Carson became a regular performer. Atlanta businessman and furniture salesman Polk C. Brockman saw a potential market for recordings of Carson's music and set up a field session with producer Ralph Peer for OKeh Records. Carson cut two tunes at the first such recording session ever held in the South. Brockman cleverly took the newly pressed recordings to the opening night of the Fiddlers' Convention that year and sold an astonishing number. OKeh and Peer had stumbled onto a new commercial genre of music.

Carson continued to record over the next decade, specializing in old-time songs and eschewing the newer, popular tunes that many of the younger hillbilly entertainers adopted. His musical career was shaped by his various political involvements; he regularly performed at functions of the Ku Klux Klan, of which he was also a member, and he performed extensively on the campaign trail for Eugene Talmadge, among other activities. His political support earned him the job of elevator operator in the Georgia State Capitol, where he remained for many years. Carson passed away in 1949, still fiddling until the day he died.

Carson represents an older generation of commercial hillbilly entertainers who refined their stagecraft before the advent of radio. These entertainers passed their old-time traditions and songs on to new generations through their records. Carson purportedly disliked the newfangled, popular styles that hillbilly musicians adopted in the 1930s and beyond. His music was very much a product of its time and place—a segregated, racially charged South where the rural way of life collided with urban industrialization.

Atlanta Journal's station WSB (whose call sign stood for their slogan, "Welcome South, Brother!") went on the air with a 100-watt transmitter, which they upgraded a few months later to 500 watts. On a clear night in the early 1920s, that station could be heard all the way to Canada and Mexico, reaching an estimated two million listeners. On September 9, 1922, WSB aired local entertainer Fiddlin' John Carson, accompanied by a string band. That was the first broadcast of what would come to be called country music. Listener response was astonishing. In those days, people wrote letters or sent telegrams to their radio stations to express their opinions of various shows. Fan mail poured in, and WSB continued to broadcast Carson and similar acts, opening doors for other local musicians who would also become country stars.

In Fort Worth, Texas, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* company's WBAP ("We Bring a Program") station went on the air on May 2, 1922. On January 4, 1923, the station broadcast an old-time fiddler on a square dance program, thereby inaugurating the radio barn dance tradition. By then, radio stations were becoming increasingly common. In Charlotte, North Carolina, three amateur radio fans pooled their resources to start WBT, which also got its commercial license in 1922

and would play a significant role in country music's development. But the two stations that would have the biggest impact on the fledgling country music industry were Chicago's WLS and Nashville's WSM.

Owned by Sears, Roebuck and Company, WLS ("World's Largest Store," the Sears advertising motto) went on the air on April 12, 1924. One week later, on April 19, the station advertised a "National Barn Dance" program, which featured an old-time string band playing square dance tunes. WLS's rural, folksy programming proved very popular with its audiences, and the station's managers subsequently expanded their offerings of that music. Before long, a slot on WLS was highly coveted among country musicians, and many of the stars of the 1930s honed their skills in front of the WLS microphones.

In Nashville, the National Life and Accident Insurance Company's WSM ("We Shield Millions," referring to the company's core business) began broadcasting October 5, 1925, with a 1,000-watt transmitter, a very powerful radio signal for its time. On November 28, WSM aired an unscheduled performance by old-time champion fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson. As had been the case in Atlanta when Fiddlin' John Carson played, the listeners' response was overwhelming. WSM executives were already contemplating a barn dance program like those at other stations, and Thompson's popularity tipped the scales. On December 26, 1925, WSM launched its regularly scheduled barn dance, which would become the Grand Ole Opry, the now-legendary show on which today's best-known country singers still aspire to perform.

The birth of country music as a commercial genre required some way for audiences to get the music, and the developments in both the record industry and radio during the early 1920s made that possible. Working-class people now had unprecedented access to music. Musicians had new sources of income. Competition between record labels and from the new medium of radio drove producers to try new styles of music they had previously ignored. And radio stations, driven by the ability to advertise commercial products to a huge population, were eager to support entertainers who could win over those targeted audiences.

Audiences

When the first country music records were released, record label executives were surprised by the astonishing number of people ready and waiting to buy them. Before the 1920s, record companies had ignored large segments of their prospective audiences—mainly working-class populations—especially in the South and rural Midwest. But in the years following World War I, those audiences gained economic and cultural power, and therefore the attention of the music industry.

During the 1920s, many different social forces brought newfound attention to the culture and music of rural Southerners, especially in the Appalachian Mountains. Henry Ford, best known for his mass-produced automobiles, decided that old-time music and dancing were culturally superior to what he perceived as moral degradation brought on by jazz and urban entertainment. Ford used some of his considerable wealth and influence to sponsor fiddle contests, publications, and events that promoted the supposedly pristine, uncorrupted music of old-time entertainers and advance his very narrow views on what was of cultural value. Among

many upper-class people in the Northeast, Southern mountain culture was a romanticized ideal that counterbalanced the rush of modernization and the apparent demise of old-fashioned values in the 1920s. Their condescending and negative attitudes toward working-class Southerners are readily apparent, however. Newspaper articles described the population as ignorant, illiterate, inbred, and backward. Many others had good intentions and better opinions of the region and its people, but still viewed Appalachian culture through a lens of superiority; ballad collectors such as Olive Dame Campbell, for instance, wanted to help the rural people from whom she gathered songs to develop their own culture, which she thought needed outside assistance in order to flourish. These more positive attitudes brought both money and attention to that population, but they also propagated the myth that Appalachia housed an essentially primitive, idealized folk culture.

The people who would become the country music audience were experiencing dramatic changes in technologies, transportation, and exposure to the world beyond their local communities. As large industries built up the South, families who had previously lived in remote areas with little or no disposable income and limited interaction with urban culture moved to take advantage of new jobs. Within the Piedmont (the region just east of the Appalachians through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia), the textile industry became the primary source of employment for many families. The employees held physically taxing, dangerous, and underpaid jobs without any protection from labor unions. Mills were hot, poorly ventilated, and crowded working environments, and little attention was paid to worker safety. Employees and their families often lived in company-owned housing, and the company owners often set up community-enrichment programs. Purported to raise the employees' standard of living, these housing arrangements and community programs in fact increased the dependence of the entire community on the employer, and thus further limited the workers' ability to stand up to unfair employment practices. Nonetheless, these community programs usually included musical education, and the close living and working quarters facilitated musical collaborations. Thus, the mill towns were fertile communities for both audiences and performers of early country music.

Outside of the Piedmont, the general industrialization that had accompanied World War I had a similar effect on audience development. Although wages were low, they still offered monetary income to a population that had previously had little access to commercial goods. Automobiles let people travel farther and faster than before, while radio brought the voices and sounds of places formerly only imagined. One lasting effect of the war was that many young people had traveled around the world, bringing home both exposure to new sounds and sights and a heightened nostalgia for local culture.

The Business of Music

The driving force behind the emergence of country music was money. Performers wanted to be paid for making music. Record executives wanted to sell records. Radio executives wanted listeners to hear advertisements so they would buy sponsors' products and services. And audiences had the money to make all of that happen. The business of country music was vital to its emergence as a genre.

For record labels, one pressing question was what to call this new music. Most of the record labels had catalogs, which were official listings of their recordings, organized by musical genre. As they began to record rural music, by both white and black artists, they realized that they did not know what to call this music or how to sell it. To the record companies, the factors that differentiated this music from other genres were neither the songs nor the musical performances themselves. Many of the same songs had been recorded earlier, but by trained classical singers. Instead, the record companies considered the music different because of the identity of the performers (poor, mostly self-taught musicians with rural Southern connections) and the intended audiences, whom the record executives assumed were much the same as the musicians. They also differentiated the musicians by race; the music by black and white musicians was sold in separate catalogs. For black performers, the term that the record labels chose was "race records." For white performers, record executives initially tried out a variety of descriptions including "Old Familiar Tunes" and "Olde Time Tunes," but the term that emerged as a prominent identifier for this music was "hillbilly."

The term **hillbilly** first appeared in print in 1900 in the *New York Journal*. In 1926, *Variety* magazine defined a hillbilly as "a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the Chautauqua, and the phonograph. . . . The mountaineer is of 'poor white trash' genera." Yet in spite of such derogatory associations, early country performers reportedly assigned the term to themselves. In January 1925, Al and Joe Hopkins, Tony Alderman, and John Rector recorded six songs for producer Ralph Peer. When Peer inquired as to the group's name for the necessary paperwork and logs of the session, Al Hopkins reportedly replied, "Call the band anything you want. We are nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia anyway." Within a short time, "hillbilly" had become an accepted identifier for much of the music that would later come to be known as the first generation of country. Like many other terms, it has been used both affectionately and insultingly over the years; many country singers identified themselves as hillbillies as a way of expressing pride in their rural, Southern, working-class heritage, yet those same singers sometimes bristled when outsiders used the term. In this book, we will use the word "hillbilly" to describe the musical styles of the first generation of country music that was generally marketed under that term and whose performers often embraced it as a description of themselves.

Along with a name, the new musical genre required an image that distinguished it from other genres. When the first hillbilly performers began recording, most of them presented themselves as well-dressed entertainers. Over the next few years, however, that image changed into a stereotypical hillbilly costume, which created a visual brand for the music. The best illustration of this is a set of photographs of Dr. Bate's band, one of the regular groups on WSM's Grand Ole Opry. Dr. Bate (1875–1936), a well-respected local physician who also fronted one of the most popular dance bands in Nashville, began performing as a regular act from the earliest days of the Opry. Publicity photos show Dr. Bate's band as sharp-dressed entertainers in conservative suits (Figure 1-2). During the show's first few years, announcer George D. Hay and others pushed the entertainers on the Opry to adopt costumes and personalities of hayseed hicks. Dr. Bate's band was named the Possum Hunters, and new publicity photos showed them in tattered overalls and sloppy hats with ties askew and pants rolled up (Figure 1-3). While many of the first

Figure 1-2 Opry performers Dr. Bate and the Possum Hunters, 1926, dressed as professional entertainers.

Source: Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Figure 1-3 Dr. Bate and the Possum Hunters, 1928, dressed in rustic hillbilly costumes as part of an advertisement.

Source: Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

generation of hillbilly musicians did come from poor, rural backgrounds, the images that audiences grew to associate with the music were costumed constructions of a stereotype that helped make the music seem even more different.

Although song **publishers** were not as visible to the music's audience as the performers and record labels, they were an essential link in the music business chain that connected performers and their audiences. Every time a song was sold on a record or on sheet music, the person or company who held the copyright to that song earned royalties. Thus, the copyrights to popular songs were valuable possessions, and publishers—who often controlled those rights—wielded significant power within the country music genre.

If this business infrastructure had not been in place, the transformation of folk music and musicians into a viable, even thriving, genre known as country music would never have taken place. Rather than tainting country music, the industry's infrastructure is an integral component of the genre that allows it to evolve. No one understood this better than the first generation of country entertainers. The $50 they earned for each song they sang was motivation to come back and make more records, and a regular spot on a sponsored radio show reached audiences that would then come to their concerts. Finally, although they saw it as a business, the early country performers were also fans; they, like their audiences, loved listening to many types of music on their home record players and radios, and many of them aspired to stardom like the pop icons of their day.

HOW THE SOUNDS GOT ON THE RECORDS

The way sound recordings were made changed radically during the 1920s. At the beginning of the decade, recordings were still made acoustically, which meant that the musicians sang or played their instruments directly into a horn-shaped device. The horn directed the sound waves into the recording equipment, where a mechanical process transferred the sound waves to a stylus that carved grooves into a wax-coated master disc.

In 1925, the major record labels began using electric microphones in the recording process. The microphone converted the music's sound waves into an electrical signal; this signal was then amplified and transmitted to the recording machine, where it was transferred by electromagnetic means to the cutter, which carved the grooves in the recording disc. Electric recording technology was much more sensitive and captured a much wider range of frequencies—low notes and high notes, loud sounds and quiet sounds. Electrical recordings allowed performers greater variation in volume and tone quality in their performance, including the option of softer "crooning" styles of singing, which, in turn, had a drastic effect on the musical styles in country music.

The Performers

The fifth and final element that contributed to the birth of country music was a group of talented, motivated, and creative performers. Literally hundreds of different musicians made hillbilly records during the first decade of country music's

history, although only a few achieved any lasting fame. As they were carving out new territory as entertainers, there was no consistency in their choices of instruments, repertory, or singing technique, and the hillbilly-era recordings ranged widely in style. This brief survey of performers introduces only a small selection of entertainers, instruments, and musical styles from the early years of hillbilly recordings. The primary instruments and styles featured in this music are fiddlers, banjo players, harmonica players, string bands, and, of course, singers. In each case we see musicians walking a fine line between amateur and professional performers in these early years. Who got a chance to make records, and who parlayed those opportunities into full-time musical careers, was not entirely predictable from circumstances.

Figure 1-4 Eck Robertson.

Source: Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson library, The Unviersity of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

By most accounts, the first country recording was made by fiddler Alexander Campbell "Eck" Robertson (1887–1975). Originally from Arkansas, Robertson lived in Texas, where he was widely known as a champion fiddler. In June 1922, he and fiddler Henry Gilliland (1845–1924) traveled to Virginia to perform at a reunion for Civil War veterans. After the reunion, the pair hopped on a train to New York City, determined to make records. When they arrived, they talked their way into the Victor Talking Machine Company, where the studio engineers recorded them playing four duets on June 30. The next day, Robertson returned to the studio and played six more tunes, including "Sallie Gooden," a traditional fiddle tune that Robertson performed with a series of impressive variations. Victor's executives had no idea yet of the potential market for hillbilly recordings and only released one record, "Sallie Gooden," backed by "Arkansas Traveler." The record sold only a modest number of copies, and Robertson did not return to the studio until 1929. And while Robertson gets credited by most historians for making the first country record, the first bona fide country hit was also by a fiddle player, in this case Fiddlin' John Carson from Atlanta.

ARTIST PROFILE

DeFord Bailey (1899–1982)

DeFord Bailey was one of the most popular performers on the Grand Ole Opry in the late 1920s and the first African American star of country music. Although he also sang and played both the banjo and guitar, Bailey was known as "The Harmonica Wizard." Audiences who heard him on the radio may not have known that he was black, but audiences who saw him perform live on Opry tours certainly did. Although most record companies catalogued all black artists in their "blues" series rather than their "hillbilly" series, based solely on the performer's race, the Brunswick label released Bailey's first commercial recordings in 1928 in their "hillbilly" series, further acknowledgement that he was accepted as an early country musician.

Bailey was born December 14, 1899, in Smith County, Tennessee, and grew up in railroad station hamlets outside Nashville. He suffered childhood illnesses that left him weak and short in stature but which also afforded him ample opportunity to develop his harmonica skills. He learned to imitate the sounds around him, including passing trains. He also absorbed the musical traditions of old-time fiddling from several relatives and described his influences as "black hillbilly."

Bailey first performed on radio in 1925 for Nashville's fledgling WDAD station. By July of the next year, he had joined the regular lineup of hillbilly performers on WSM's Barn Dance, where he inspired emcee George D. Hay to rename the show. In December 1927, WSM aired a network broadcast of Walter Damrosch's NBC *Music Appreciation Hour*, which had featured only a piece of modern classical music depicting a train ride. Immediately after that, Bailey stepped up to the microphone and played his signature piece, "Pan American Blues," which is a blues-influenced imitation of a train rolling down the tracks and blowing its whistle, all done on solo harmonica. Afterward, Hay quipped, "For the past hour we have been

Banjo players also featured prominently in the early days of hillbilly recording. Like Fiddlin' John Carson, Uncle Dave Macon (1870–1952) was part of an older generation who moved into the entertainment business as the forces of modernization passed him by in his other profession. Uncle Dave, as he was known, remembered firsthand the vaudeville acts and traveling stage shows of the late nineteenth century that had passed through his hometown in Tennessee. His musical influences included both white and black entertainers, from whom he adapted blues and comedy routines. As a young man, he ran the Macon Midway Mule and Wagon Transportation Company in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, just south of Nashville. But when the automobile put him out of business in 1920, he turned to his banjo for a new career. Before long, Uncle Dave was touring on the vaudeville circuit and gaining notoriety for his bawdy humor and catchy songs. His recording career was launched courtesy of the Nashville-based Sterchi Brothers, who owned a furniture company. Furniture dealers such as Polk Brockman in Atlanta and the Sterchis sold record players in their stores, along with records to play on them, which gave them a vested interest in developing new, local talent. The Sterchis sent Uncle Dave and fiddler Sid Harkreader to New York in 1924 to record for Vocalion Records. Macon's solo rendition of "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy," accompanied by banjo, captures the energy and appeal that he used to win over live audiences, while representing an old-time style of banjo playing.

listening to the music taken largely from the Grand Opera, but from now on we will present the Grand Ole Opry."

Bailey made two sets of commercial recordings during his life. In 1927, Hay sent him to New York City, where he cut eight sides for Brunswick. A year later, Bailey took part in the first commercial recording session in Nashville, produced by Ralph Peer. Bailey remained a major star on the Opry until 1941, when he was fired. By then, the audience's preferences and tastes had changed, and Bailey's harmonica solos were not part of the current trends in country music. A conflict between performance rights organizations (who handle copyright royalties) also prevented him from playing his signature tunes on air, which left him with nothing to perform. He retired from the musical spotlight, appearing only a few times as he got older. Bailey spent the rest of his life in Nashville, doing odd jobs to make ends meet. In 2005, he was inducted posthumously into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Figure 1-5 Deford Bailey with his harmonica attached to a megaphone.

Source: Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Banjo contests were nearly as common in the Appalachian South as fiddle contests, and one admired champion was Samantha Bumgarner (c. 1880–1960). In 1924, she and her friend Eva Davis went to New York to make records. Without an appointment, they walked in on the executives at Columbia Records and convinced them to record twelve songs. "Aunt Samantha" did not, however, manage to launch a commercial career as a hillbilly artist. She made no more recordings for almost thirty years, but instead became a staple of the folk festival circuit.

Hillbilly recordings in the 1920s featured several harmonica players, although the instrument would not be common in country music again until several decades later. Along with Eck Robertson and Fiddlin' John Carson, Henry Whitter (1892–1941), a guitarist, harmonica player, and singer, was one of the first earliest recording artists of hillbilly music. In March 1923, he reportedly traveled to New York City and made a few test recordings for OKeh records. None of those were ever released, but in December of that year, following the commercial success of Fiddlin' John Carson, Whitter returned and made several successful records, including his best known, "Wreck on the Southern Old 97." Another early country music harmonica player was Dr. Humphrey Bate (1875–1936), who not only starred on Nashville's Opry but also introduced "Harmonica Wizard" DeFord Bailey (see Artist Profile) to the show's management.

Listening Guide

"Hallelujah Side" (1926)

PERFORMERS: Ernest Stoneman and the Dixie Mountaineers (Ernest Stoneman, vocal and guitar; Kahle Brewer, vocal and fiddle; Walter Mooney, vocal; Tom Leonard, vocal; Hattie Stoneman, vocal; Irma Frost, organ) Songwriter: Johnson Oatman Jr. and J. Howard Entwisle

ORIGINAL RELEASE: Victor 20224

FORM: Verse-chorus

STYLE: Hillbilly gospel

Ernest Stoneman (1893–1964) was perhaps the most enterprising of the first generation of country recording artists. Born and raised in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, Ernest was the eldest son of a lay Baptist preacher, Elisha Stoneman. Elisha frequently took his children along when he traveled to preach at nearby churches. As the eldest surviving child, Ernest was in charge of leading the singing, an assignment that taught him dozens of gospel hymns. He also taught himself guitar, banjo, and especially autoharp with help and encouragement from his cousins.

Ernest's wife, Hattie Stoneman (née Frost [1900–1976]), and her younger sister, Irma Lee Frost, were largely responsible for Ernest's musical success. The girls' father, John William "Bill" Frost, was one of the better fiddlers in Galax, Virginia, and he contributed to Ernest's musical development by making a home-made banjo for Ernest and a cousin to practice on. Irma was an accomplished church organist and could read musical notation, while Hattie took after her father as a fiddler.

Never one to keep a job for long, Ernest was working as a carpenter when he heard a record made by his acquaintance Henry Whitter. Deciding that he could sing better, Ernest contacted two record labels and paid his own way to New York for an audition. During the first few years of his career, Stoneman cut records for at least six different labels, often with ensembles he put together with family members and assorted friends and neighbors. He redid songs that other singers had recorded and acted as a regional contact for record executives seeking other talented musicians from the southern Virginia area.

"Hallelujah Side" was a collaboration between Johnson Oatman, Jr., who wrote the words to this as well as other popular hymns such as "Count Your Blessings," and J. Howard Entwisle, who also composed the music for "Keep on the Sunny Side." The lyrics celebrated the joy found in God's grace for Christians as far superior to any possible earthly wealth, a theme common in the revivalist hymns and one that found resonance with audiences who themselves had little in terms of material wealth. Oatman and Entwisle published "Hallelujah Side" in 1898.

Hattie and Irma had a large collection of paperback hymnals from which the group sang at several recording sessions. On September 21, 1926, Ernest Stoneman and the Dixie Mountaineers recorded "Hallelujah Side" along with six other hymns for Victor Records. For accompaniment, they used guitar, fiddle, and pump organ. The rhythms of the hymn were driven mostly by Stoneman's guitar technique—the pattern of a bass note followed by three strummed chords was his signature. Ernest and Hattie sang the melody, Hattie in the higher soprano register and Ernest an octave below. The other musicians sang the harmony mostly as printed in the published version of the hymn, although, as they did for the group's

other recordings, they simplified the rhythms and chords to suit their own style. The tinny, nasal timbre of their voices was a common style of singing in the Southern Appalachians, whose characteristics are further emphasized by the recording technology of that time. The group performed the hymn much as they would have in a local church setting, singing straight through verses and choruses.

Figure 1-6 Courtesy of Patsy Stoneman and Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

TIME	FORM	LISTENING CUES	DISCUSSION
0:00	Instrumental introduction	Fiddle, organ, and guitar	The organ's low notes stick out in the musical texture, while the fiddle plays the melody with the upper notes of the organ. The instruments play through the verse of the hymn.
0:21	Verse 1	"Once a sinner far from Jesus, I was perishing with cold. . ."	The voices enter tentatively at first. Ernest Stoneman sings the melody an octave below Hattie. The other voices fill in the four-part harmony. The verse ends with the song's title.
0:42	Chorus	"Oh, Glory be to Jesus. . ."	The chorus uses part of the same melody as the verse and ends again with the song's title.

Continued

Listening Guide

"Hallelujah Side" (1926) Continued

TIME	FORM	LISTENING CUES	DISCUSSION
1:02	Verse 2	"Though the world may sweep around me. . ."	The musicians continue straight into the second verse with no break after the chorus. The fiddle can be heard playing a decorative descant during this verse.
1:23	Chorus	"Oh, Glory be to Jesus. . ."	The chorus repeats. The lower men's harmony is clearly audible in this section.
1:42	Verse 3	"Not for all the earth's gold millions would I leave this precious place. . ."	The third verse celebrates the value of Christian salvation over earthly wealth.
2:03	Chorus	"Oh, Glory be to Jesus. . ."	The final chorus is identical to the earlier iterations. At the end, Stoneman's guitar chords can be heard in their typical note-strum-strum-strum pattern. The recording ends at 2:24; there was not enough time allowed by the recording equipment for another verse and chorus.

The singers on early hillbilly records ranged from instrumentalists such as Fiddlin' John Carson, Uncle Dave Macon, and Charlie Poole, who simply sang as part of their act although they were not particularly famous for their vocal talent, to professionally trained vocalists. These professional singers held obvious appeal for the record companies because they lived near the major recording studios, making it unnecessary to transport bulky equipment hundreds of miles. They also typically read music and were already familiar with recording studios' procedures. Yet their role in the early years of country music is ironic, given that in the 1920s, the performer's biography was the primary delineator of the country genre. Furthermore, fans have valued early country music in many cases for its perceived authenticity as an expression of lived, working-class rural experience, thus complicating the very notion of authenticity as fans have constructed it in country music.

String bands, usually consisting of one or more fiddles, banjo, and guitar, were also extremely common in early hillbilly recordings. Almost every radio station had one or more resident string bands, and most hillbilly musicians recorded with some version of a string band during the course of their careers. Groups such as Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, from Atlanta, Georgia, brought the same humor, vocal patter, and excitement into the recording studio that made them regional favorites for dances and gatherings. On some records, such as the traditional fiddle tune "Soldier's Joy," the band members introduce the song just as they would to a live crowd, encouraging everyone to roll up the carpets and dance along. The Skillet Lickers included two of the biggest stars in early hillbilly music, blind vocalist and guitarist Riley Puckett and fiddler Clayton McMichen.

In North Carolina, Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers became major stars, as well. Charlie Poole (1892–1931) was, by all accounts, a hell-raisin' entertainer who even predicted his own untimely demise at age thirty-nine. In 1917, Poole went to work in the textile mills in Spray, North Carolina, but for musicians such as Charlie Poole and his bandmates, the drudgery of a mill worker's life was a powerful incentive to become paid performers. Determined to seek their own opportunities, in the summer of 1925, Poole, Posey Rorer, and Norman Woodlieff hopped a train to New York City. There they convinced Columbia executives to record four songs on the label's "Old Familiar Tunes" series. "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down" was their first release, and it sold a reputed 102,000 copies—a stunning success for that era and an illustration of the popularity enjoyed by string bands.

One of the most industrious bandleaders was Ernest Stoneman, a musician from the Galax, Virginia, area. Stoneman's primary instrument was the autoharp, but he often accompanied himself with guitar. At other times he fronted a well-known string band (see Listening Guide). His ensemble's membership was constantly in flux. Even the band's name changed frequently: when Stoneman recorded gospel hymns, his group was known as the Dixie Mountaineers, but when they recorded racier comedy numbers, they were called the Blue Ridge Corn Shuckers. Sometimes, changes in personnel and band names were merely attempts to circumvent exclusive contracts with any one record label. Stoneman, for instance, held contracts with multiple record labels at the same time, a practical move for someone trying to make a living in the recording business but one that required some careful maneuvering.

Vernon Dalhart (1883–1948) is the most famous of these early hillbilly music stars who was not, biographically speaking, a hillbilly. Raised in Dallas, Texas, Dalhart (born Marion Try Slaughter) trained as a classical musician specializing in light opera. He moved to New York City in 1910, where he worked as a professional musician and made records of popular songs. In 1924, Edison (one of the big three record labels) hired Dalhart to sing "Wreck of the Old 97," a version of the song that Henry Whitter had recently recorded that was proving quite popular. Dalhart's unprecedented commercial success as a hillbilly singer has been a point of consternation for many historians and fans; his trained voice and professionally accompanied New York studio sessions produced recordings that fans nonetheless heard and endorsed as the essence of country music.

Other singers, such as Bradley Kincaid (1895–1989), combined a smooth, trained vocal style with a personal investment in disseminating old-time folk songs that he collected. Born in Kentucky, Kincaid began performing on WLS's National Barn Dance in 1926 and made his first records a year later. Although Kincaid's voice had the same resonant, sweet, even polished sound as did many popular singers outside of country music, he spent his time researching old-time songs and attempting to preserve what he believed were authentic folk melodies. He then made recordings of many of those songs and published songbooks with his favorites, which sold extremely well. His career offers another illustration of the fact that the commercial aspects of the music business often involved selling music that was valued for its noncommercial nature.

Listening Guide

"The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" (1923)

PERFORMER: Fiddlin' John Carson (vocal and fiddle)

SONGWRITERS: Will S. Hays

ORIGINAL RELEASE: OKeh 4890

FORM: Verse-chorus

STYLE: Early hillbilly

Fiddlin' John Carson recalled finding the lyrics for this old minstrel song in an old copy of *Greer's Almanac*. It was originally composed in 1871 by Will S. Hays, a songwriter from Louisville, Kentucky. Several versions of the song had already been recorded by popular singers, including one sung in an exaggerated African American dialect and accompanied by banjo, imitating a typical nineteenth-century minstrel stage performance of the song. In the song's lyrics, an ex-slave waxes nostalgic for the supposed antebellum comforts of a Southern plantation, lamenting that his "Old Massa and old Missus" are now dead and that "darkies" are no longer in the fields, leaving him with only his old dog in a crumbling cabin. That theme was common in minstrel songs written in the decades after the Civil War. Carson tended to favor these sorts of pathos-drenched, old-time, nostalgic songs. In this instance, his choice of songs also played into the legacy of minstrelsy: a white performer impersonating a black slave on stage. Carson's performance is further charged with meaning if one considers his membership in the Ku Klux Klan and undeniably racist personal politics.

In June 1923, producer Ralph Peer came to Atlanta to record Carson, who sang two songs for him. Carson accompanied his singing with his own fiddle playing. For modern listeners, this recording immediately sounds old because of the narrow range of frequencies that it reproduces, the extensive surface noise, and the harsh, throaty timbre of the singer's voice. Consider how much of your perception of this recording comes from those sonic factors as you listen to it.

Texan Carl T. Sprague (1895–1979) was one of several singers from Texas and the West who added cowboy songs to the early hillbilly record business, even though their cowboy-themed contributions were initially overshadowed by the string bands and Appalachian mountain songs. Sprague's voice was quite polished, and he most often sang while accompanying himself with sparse guitar playing. With his focus primarily on traditional cowboy songs, Sprague highlighted what would be a lasting tension in country music between performances of traditional repertory and an emphasis on writing new songs.

Among the first generation of country musicians were many performers who were recruited by family members to serve as duet partners and band members. For instance, Rosa Lee Carson, known as "Moonshine Kate," partnered with her father, Fiddlin' John Carson, regularly. In their performances, she played a smart-tongued,