

Chapter 8

Snow Country Hillbillies: Northern Country Music

Program 8 Performances

1. Fendermen, "Muleskinner Blues." 2. Lorraine Rice, "Shoes." 3. Bobby and Lorraine Rice, "Tippy Toein'." 4. Famous Lashua, "Chocolate Ice Cream Cone." 5. Niilo Oja, "Minnesota, We Love You." 6. Robert ("Bobby Bullett") St. Germaine, "The Devil's Mouth." 7. Robert ("Bobby Bullett") St. Germaine, "Reservation Auto." 8. North Country Band, "No Count Blues."

Country's Commercial Roots

From modest beginnings as a commercial endeavor in the 1920s, country music has grown into a major branch of the entertainment industry. It is a vernacular music, rooted in the rural Anglo-Celtic and African-American musical traditions of the southern United States. When radio and phonograph records proliferated nearly simultaneously in the early twentieth century, cultural and especially musical life in rural America was transformed. No longer was it the ruralite's only option to listen to local homemade music or to wait for infrequent performances by touring troupes. Through a machine—a phonograph or a radio—one could broaden one's musical horizons. While urbanites controlled the nascent record and radio industries, they soon realized that there was a rural market for music other than the dance bands and classical orchestras of the cities.

The Okeh record company began to send out talent scouts to rural sites, set up recording equipment in a local school or warehouse, and record whatever musicians were the most popular in that area. Columbia, Victor, and others soon copied this early strategy. Okeh's scout during the early 1920s, Ralph Peer, may have been the first to present authentic southern folk musicians to the American public (Malone 1974). These locally recorded and locally marketed discs produced an unintentional benefit: the historical documentation of rural traditional music.

But the record companies quickly decided they could much more efficiently record and sell the records of a few musicians who had the potential of a more than local appeal. The careers of the earliest national country stars, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, resulted from this later marketing strategy. Rodgers and the Carters were both recorded in 1927 by talent scout Ralph Peer, by then working for Victor, in a famous recording session in Bristol, Tennessee.

Meanwhile, to compete—as they thought—with phonograph records, radio station owners also stumbled upon a way to appeal to rural listeners. Appearances

by performers like Fiddlin' John Carson on Atlanta's WSB in the early 1920s produced a tremendous popular reaction. In 1923, WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, inaugurated the era of hillbilly radio barn dances with an hour and a half program of square dance music. Within two years, WLS in Chicago began to broadcast the "Barn Dance," and WSM in Nashville started the "Grand Ole Opry."

The WLS program became the most influential country music radio show during the 1930s; NBC eventually carried a one-hour segment of it, the "National Barn Dance," coast to coast. Although eclipsed by the "Grand Ole Opry" after World War II, the "National Barn Dance" gave midwestern performers a showcase. Lula Belle and Scotty from Lebanon, Indiana, Grace Wilson from Owosso, Michigan, and the Goose Island Ramblers and Eddie Peabody from Madison, Wisconsin, were among the many Midwesterners who joined Kentuckians like the Prairie Ramblers and the Cumberland Ridge Runners in its Saturday night lineup.

Emerging by the 1950s as Music City, the center of the country music industry, Nashville brought a greater southern orientation to the music and the dominance of performers from Dixie. Nonetheless, northerners too have had influential careers in country music, most notably, Dave Dudley from Spencer, Wisconsin, and Pee Wee King from the south side of Milwaukee.

King of the Cowpolkas

Pee Wee King, born Frank Kuczynski, was from the urban Polish-American working class—a community which during his youth in the 1930s had little association with country music. His father, John Kuczynski, a skilled fiddler and concertina player, enlivened many a Polish wedding in Milwaukee with polkas and *obereks* (Corenthal 1991). While still a boy, Frank became adept at playing the piano accordion, learning not only Polish ethnic music, but Slovenian, German, and American popular music as well.

In the early 1930s Frank happened to be in an accordion shop at the moment when noted country music promoter J. L. Frank came in, looking for an accordionist for his group, the Log Cabin Boys. Frank signed on to tour with the band and soon adopted the stage name Pee Wee King. In 1935 Pee Wee married J. L. Frank's daughter and also became the leader of a new band, the Golden West Cowboys. They began to perform on the "Grand Ole Opry" in 1937, and in 1938 the band was featured in a Gene Autry film, "Gold Mine in the Sky." The Polish kid from Milwaukee settled in Louisville, Kentucky, and donned a ten-gallon hat and western wear, taking advantage of the glorification of the cowboy in the popular culture of the day.

In October 1941, to entertain American servicemen, the "Grand Ole Opry" put together the Camel Caravan, a traveling troupe of twenty performers, including Pee Wee King and his Golden West Cowboys. By late 1942 they had logged more than fifty thousand miles, putting on 175 shows in nineteen states at sixty-eight different military installations.

Through the 1940s and 1950s, the accordion remained an important instrument in the western style of country music, thanks in large part to Pee Wee's influence. He also used his musical creativity to bring elements of Wisconsin polka to country music. His Polish heritage gave Pee Wee an affinity for the ethnic melodies and the polka and waltz beats familiar from his youth. A section of the melody of "Pawel walcer," a Polish concertina number, shows up in the chorus of the song "Cattle Call," which he has regularly performed with vocalist Redd Stewart.



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*My Best to you,
Famous*

**Postcards sent out by Famous Lashua to listeners in Eau Claire, 1948
Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection**

As a songwriter Pee Wee has been even more influential than he has been as a performer. His tune "Slow Poke" was the first to gain wide popularity in the early 1950s, but the famed "Tennessee Waltz," which King and Redd Stewart coauthored in 1948, remains one of the best-known country tunes of all time and contributed to country's popular surge. Although it initially appeared as a country tune and was well received in 1948, "Tennessee Waltz" was recorded by pop singer Patti Page in 1950, strangely enough as the "B" side of a record. This version was tremendously popular; by May 1951, 4.8 million records of the song had been sold (Malone 1974).

Truck Drivin' Man

In 1952, about the time Pee Wee King's career was at its peak, Dave Dudley and his Country Caravan recorded "You Don't Care" and "Nashville Blues" on a small Milwaukee label, Pfau Records. Coming from a small town in central Wisconsin, Dudley finally made his mark in Nashville by becoming, in the mid-1960s, the most visible spokesman for the truck driver as country music hero. Railroadmen had been the romantic transportation workers of early country music: the engineers got the spotlight in "Wreck of the Old 97" and "George Alley's FFV," Jimmie Rodgers was "The Singing Brakeman," and even railroad vagabonds became romantic figures in "The Hobo's Meditation" and "Waiting for a Train." As the highway took an increasing share of the nation's freight, the apotheosis of the truck driver ensued. Like the idealized cowboy, he was a traveling loner, independent, determined, brave yet kind, facing dangers daily.

Although earlier truck driving songs had been issued by singers such as Red Sovine, the Willis Brothers, and Dick Curless (perhaps the earliest was Cliff Bruner and Moon Mullican's 1939 Decca recording of "Truck Driver's Blues"), Dudley's 1966 hit, "Six Days on the Road," crossed over into pop music and set off the flood of "truck drivin'" songs which followed.

Projecting a hard-as-nails, working-class macho image, Dudley developed a virile rockabilly singing style full of Elvis Presley-like vocal slurs and guttural growls. His Mercury album, *Songs about the Working Man*, summed up the change in country music, parallel to the transformation of much of its audience, the rural populace, from farm people to blue collar workers in an industrial society.

In the 1980s, like many other country stars whose commercial success had peaked then declined in earlier decades, Dudley began performing extensively for the European, especially German, audiences who follow classic country music with a connoisseurship usually reserved for fine wines. Even in Europe he has continued performing his highway-oriented themes, but now his semi is on the autobahn; his 1990 German hit "Im Stau," meaning "stuck in a traffic jam," has English verses and a German chorus.