

MUSICAL GREAT AWAKENING

Country's New Traditionalists

JAMES RING ADAMS

Country music is not only alive and well, it has launched into an artistic revival such as delighted fans haven't seen for 30 years. Every month brings forward a new performer singing good-to-excellent original material steeped in the traditional sounds of honky-tonk, gospel, or Texas swing. The musicians are dedicated to their music first and foremost, but the sudden emergence of a new, highly talented generation in a somewhat despised art form amounts to a minor social phenomenon. If you take Pat Robertson and the Tax Revolt seriously, then you had better start listening to the country music traditionalists. They're part of the same movement.

Old Hickory's Bards

Just what's going on? In anthropological shorthand, you could call it the reemergence of the country's Scotch-Irish culture. The national subconscious has always been nagged by the awareness of "another America" in the hinterlands, somewhere off the superhighways, up in the hills, underneath the bicoastal jetliners. It's an America with roots in the frontier. It's an America still drawing spiritual strength from the Great Awakenings of the first Baptists and Methodists. It's an America descended from the resettled Scotsmen who left northern Ireland in a bitter 18th century dispute over tax bills. This is the America that rose up under Andrew Jackson to avenge the slights, real or imagined, suffered at the hands of Eastern seaboard merchants of English descent. The animosity between the Scotch-Irish and the English, a major ethnic conflict in American politics, has simmered for generations, even while it was pushed well to the back of public memory. Now, for a variety of reasons, the wheel has turned, and Scotch-Irish culture in all its forms demands recognition.

These demands are particularly evident in the renewed self-confidence of country music. Although the Scotch-Irish don't have a monopoly on song-writing or performing, their genetic tradition does seem to predispose them toward nasal flats and twangs. Many of country music's greatest names have descended from the people that took the bagpipe for its national instrument.

Many country singers, however, would decline to describe themselves in such sweeping sociocultural and ethnic terms. Leading traditionalists such as Reba McEntire,

32, and Ricky Skaggs, 33, (both winners of the industry's leading honor, the Country Music Association's "Entertainer of the Year" award), seem determined to avoid categorization. These young singers are reviving a wide variety of traditions. McEntire, the redheaded daughter of an Oklahoma rancher, says her musical heroes are Southwest honky-tonkers such as George Jones and Merle Haggard. Skaggs, a Kentucky native, began his career as a bluegrass child prodigy. Best-seller George Strait, 34, a southern Texas native who wears button-downs and blue jeans, calls his style "white blues."

The range widens beyond these headliners. A lesser known but influential family singing group, the Whites (whose lead vocalist, Sharon, is Mrs. Ricky Skaggs), combines close harmony—one of the oldest styles—with the Texas swing rhythms inspired by the 1930s big bands. Dwight Yoakam, a hillbilly militant from Columbus, Ohio, mixes the nasality of his grandfather's eastern Kentucky with the over-amplified beat of the Los Angeles punk rock circuit. At a youthful 40, crossover star Emmylou Harris is almost the matriarch of the movement, and has been marketed as a folk, rock, and country artist as well as various hyphenated combinations of the three.

These singers all say, without mincing words, that they are reviving an American art form once headed toward extinction. Many will add that they are fighting a threat from within; they blame the withering of the tradition on Nashville, which, lured by the profits from crossover hits, watered down and slicked up its country product until it couldn't be told apart from bad pop music. Years of stagnation and artistic mediocrity followed, and the country audience dwindled.

Commercialized Populism

The traditionalists aren't just preserving the original country styles; they are showing that the music is still a viable, valuable part of popular culture. They avoid the rigidity of, say, the bluegrass purists, who insist on using only acoustic (non-amplified) instruments. The new coun-

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try generation gives an honored place to the electric guitar. (The honky-tonk players of the '40s needed amplified instruments just to be heard above the din.) The neo-honky-tonkers do return to the more austere arrangements of the '40s, stripping away the violins and background chorales of the "Nashville sound," but they also embrace the recording technology of the '80s. Above all, they are willing to be tested by the discipline of the marketplace, and that's where they are making their most impressive points. Traditional albums are now going gold and platinum (500,000 and one million sold) in a market where sales of 300,000 are highly respectable. Concert receipts of youngsters such as George Strait and Reba McEntire are beginning to match those of the big crossover names such as Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. This isn't a movement of antiquarians, after all; it's a hardheaded commercial enterprise.

Country music is by definition commercial. The turning point distinguishing this genre from the preceding tradition of British folk ballads, or 19th century popular music, was the advent of the radio and the recordplayer in the 1920s. (Scholars say the first country record to sell a million copies was a 1924 rendition of "The Wreck of the Old 97" by Vernon Dählhart, who was actually a light-opera singer.) Ever since, the electronic audience has been country music's mainstay. The new traditionalists are important, not because a few performers want to indulge in a recherché style but, bluntly, because they sell records. They've shown, in terms the recording industry can understand, that they speak for a substantial number of people.

It's tempting to fit this constituency into the demographics of the Reagan Revolution. The electoral strength of President Reagan's ideology has tracked the population shift to the South and West. These regions now command an electoral college majority sufficient to elect a president without any help from the urban, industrial Midwest and Northeast. It's only natural that regions holding the political balance of power should demand cultural respect as well.

But there's nothing in this cultural revival that should cheer the strategists of any political establishment. Travel to the Kentucky hill farms and the Texas Panhandle ranches that sustain country music, and you will encounter a populism distrustful of all political parties. Like the born-again Christians and the foot-soldiers of the tax referenda, hard-core country fans have little use for any sort of social elite.

The best way to understand this movement is to talk to its cultural leaders. Country musicians are rightly proud of their rapport with their fans. Their audiences are smaller but less fickle than those of rock or pop stars. The singers perform in closer quarters—at country fairs, dance halls and honky-tonks. Even the biggest names emphasize their plain-folks origins. Their personal histories show vividly the many varieties of traditionalism, and the singleness of its purpose.

Militant Hillbilly

No one better captures the apolitical, antiestablishment ethnicity of this movement than its star intellectual, the 30-year-old neo-hillbilly singer, Dwight Yoakam. At six-foot-two, he's an imposing, energetic performer and a prolific

songwriter. His two big hits, "Honky-Tonk Man" and "Guitars, Cadillacs and Hillbilly Music," pretty well define his musical direction. His angry, articulate defense of this tradition against the diluted Nashville pap has made him much more popular with the music press than with the record companies.

Yoakam (the name is a Dutch graft on his Scotch-Irish descent) declares that his purpose is to preserve the "ethnic American form of music" developed by the "white, rural, underprivileged mass" with whom he strongly identifies. In his version of cultural history, upper class conservatives looked down on this element—"those disgusting honky-tonkers out there in those roadhouses carrying on again"—until the '60s presented them with something far

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worse. "The Frankenstein monster Rock 'n' Roll was in their children's bedroom." Seeking allies to counter the radical drift of '60s rock, says Yoakam, conservatives embraced the country music they previously despised.

This capsule sociology falls short of explaining 50 years of country music's great popularity, but it dovetails with Yoakam's portrayal of his own career. Passing over his middle-class upbringing, Yoakam emphasizes his southeast Kentucky ancestors. His grandfather, Luther Tibbs, a miner's union organizer, provides Yoakam's link to the radical turmoil of the '30s. His more sedate parents immersed him in the region's musical tradition. "I come from the last generation which could be exposed to country music just by pushing buttons on the radio," he says.

This background didn't help him much in his first assault on Nashville, however. "They told me I was too country," he claims. He left almost immediately for the country purists' mecca, Bakersfield, California. The capital of the Okie migration Bakersfield is an outpost of southwestern culture, right down to its blocks of "shotgun double" bungalows. For a time in the '60s, Merle Haggard and Buck Owens set up a studio there that became a center for honky-tonk recording. But when Yoakam started playing their music up and down the San Joaquin Valley, all he found were bar-owners who only wanted to hear familiar radio staples. Disillusioned, Yoakam then drifted to Los Angeles, where he found work in the punk rock clubs opening for groups such as Los Lobos, the Blasters, and the Violent Femmes. Here his neo-honky-tonk act found an audience.

Yoakam has several explanations for this remarkable



Dwight Yoakam: Coal Miner's Grandson

phenomenon. Some young rock fans, the so-called cowpunks, claimed to be interested in country, and when Yoakam gave them a dose of the real thing, they proved true to their word. Beyond that, Yoakam discovered a common purpose with "roots rockers" such as the Blasters. They, too, were trying to recover basic musical styles, shedding later accretions. And at the origins of rock 'n' roll, they ran squarely into Yoakam's country tradition.

"Country music is the white parent of rock 'n' roll, just as jump blues, Delta blues, is its black parent," Yoakam likes to say. He can lecture for hours on the affinities between hillbilly country music and early rock, finding continuity even in their darker sides. The premature death of Hank Williams, says Yoakam, was the first rock tragedy.

Yoakam may go further than his peers do in embracing the uglier features of his tradition, but he best exemplifies his generation's across-the-board quest for its roots, a rebellion against the homogenization and assimilation of its parents. Yoakam's official biography conveniently skips one generation of mid-Ohio bourgeois comfort. There's an artificial quality to his veneration of the one ancestor who fits the Kentucky miner stereotype.

But Yoakam is no phony. He and his urban counterparts fit squarely into a pattern familiar to anyone who has read Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which describes the efforts of second-generation immigrants to assimilate, and of the third generation to recover its distinctive ethnic traditions. Not only does Yoakam explicitly embrace the Glazer-Moynihan model,

he adds that his own people were immigrants to urban Ohio. "There's a saying in Ohio," he states, "that the three R's in Kentucky mean 'readin', 'ritin', and Route 23.' I made it the title of one of my songs."

Honky-Tonk Calvinists

Yoakam may be trying to recover a fading tradition, but the Whites have been living it. If Buck White, a soft-spoken, weather-beaten Texan, isn't the First Father of the traditionalist movement, he is certainly the First Father-in-law. His oldest daughter, Sharon, married Ricky Skaggs after years of encountering each other on the bluegrass circuit and a tour together with Emmylou Harris. White and his impressive group of proteges, including Dobroist Jerry Douglas, frequently appear on Ricky Skaggs' highly successful albums. Sharon and her two sisters, Cheryl and Rosie, still perform with the family group, which has been quietly winning a reputation as the repository of a rich musical heritage.

"Buck White is interesting," says Bill Ivey, director of the Country Music Foundation, "because he does all the traditional styles." Buck absorbed all the ingredients in the southwestern musical stew—honky-tonk, Texas swing, ethnic dance hall, white blues, even rock 'n' roll—while playing around Wichita Falls, Texas, and he passed these traditions to his daughters. Buck maintained another country tradition, as well. "More than in any other form of music," says one prominent critic, "country musicians are expected to have a biography to match the genre." While

raising his family, White held a day job as a plumber. His grandparents were sharecroppers. "All they had was an old car and a bunch of kids and they would pull cotton," he says. These people—"the people who toil," White calls them—are the backbone of the country music audience.

For the genuine article like the Whites, the cowpunks and the young, middle-class traditionalists pose something of a problem. Yoakam says, "They want to do it, but they don't know how." Sharon White confesses that she feels that some younger performers "don't know what they're singing about. Maybe they're singing about a way of life that's gone."

These traditionalists fear the more cerebral revivalists will miss something at the heart and soul of the music. This generation has certainly had a much easier life than its forebears. Yet the elusive element isn't simply the memory of the singer's (or his parents' or grandparents') hardscrabble upbringing. It's more serious, and more unsettling. Country music resonates to the religion that sustains, and torments, its people.

The Whites present the most attractive face of this religion. Decent and tolerant churchgoers, they're known for refusing to play songs that condone immorality. (And, although congressional wives don't seem to have noticed, such lyrics abound in country music as well as in rock.) But the Whites' repertoire does deal with infidelity and human frailty. "We sing from the hurtin' side," explains Sharon. The Whites regard their musical talent as a divine vocation. Yet they've spurned the suggestion that they could have greater financial success as a gospel group. They take their religion too seriously to exploit it.

But their Christianity permeates their music in a way that critics seem to find disturbing. This faith literally reaches beyond the grave, directly confronting man's mortality, the one modern taboo, as rural populations have done for generations. Country songs preach an uncompromising theology, where death is a fact of life, and the afterlife is a matter of fact. Songs such as "Band of Angels" ("Bear me away on your snowy wings to my eternal home"), inspire critics to describe Sharon's singing as "haunting," "ethereal," and "eery."

Calvinism haunts even the raunchiest of country singers. This constant religious tension, a nagging awareness of sin, underlies what Yoakam calls the "deep, dark side of country music." Hank Williams, as deep and dark a honky-tonker as they came, also wrote some of the most beautiful gospel songs of his generation.

Much of America finds this Calvinism unnerving. The bicoastal elite derides the evangelicals—to take them seriously would mean admitting that perhaps they are nourished by a side of human experience that the "beautiful people" scramble to ignore. American intellectuals also betray a guilty conscience. After all, the evangelicals were here first. The religion of the Great Awakenings is as basic an American institution as the American Civil Liberties Union. Very few religions have given up their hegemony as peacefully as did American Protestantism, and that transition was not altogether graceful. What if evangelical congregations decide to rebel against this diminished status? That is the current nightmare of American politics.

These religious struggles are very much muted in the



The Whites
"Singing from the hurtin' side"

Whites' amiable personalities, and it is not necessarily this great cultural division that has kept them from their big commercial breakthrough. But there exists a special poignancy in their Texas swing arrangement of Hank Williams' great gospel song, "House of Gold." You have a feeling Buck White means it when he keens the refrain:

I'd rather be in a dark cold grave,
And know that my poor soul was saved,
Than live in this world in a house of gold
And deny my God, and doom my soul.

Fallen Angel

The question raised by the Whites, whether the affluent, younger generation can really understand country, has one answer in the career of Emmylou Harris. Primarily a saga of personal tragedy and musical development, it foretells the growth of a traditionalist constituency among rock-oriented youth. This strand of the movement originated in the heart of the '60s youth culture, in the collaboration of Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons.

Their story has excited so much morbid curiosity over the past decade that it is in danger of becoming the *Rolling Stone* version of *Love Story*. But Harris reopened the topic herself with her semi-autobiographical 1985 album *The Ballad of Sally Rose*, and her music gives these memories a genuine dignity.

Gram Parsons, a Georgia-bred Harvard dropout, was one of those musical geniuses who pack a lifetime of work into a decade, and then self-destruct. In 1972, he heard Harris at a club in Washington, D.C., where she worked as a folksinger. She doesn't recall being terribly impressed, but when he sent her an airplane ticket to record with him in California, she went. Parsons, by this time, had forged his distinctive blend of pure melodic line and strong allusive lyrics. Critics called the result "country-rock." ("Gram hated that term," recalls Harris. "He used to say that it



Emmylou Harris
Gothic Revivalist

didn't take either form seriously.") At the height of the psychedelic era, the power of his work brought a freshet of country music into the heart of California rock. Harris toured and recorded with Parsons' Fallen Angels Band for only one year, but their appearances together at places such as the Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin, Texas (where they played to 12 encores) have become local legends. Parsons brought Harris and his growing following to a new appreciation of honky-tonk and hillbilly singers such as Merle Haggard and the Louvin Brothers.

As the population ages, it gravitates toward a music better suited to the rhythms and concerns of middle age.

For whatever reason, Parsons also copied the desperate conduct of his honky-tonk heroes. In 1973, he died of undetermined causes. He was 26. By all accounts, the loss devastated Harris. Her music became loaded with images of guilt, helplessness as if in the face of a natural phenomenon, and the discovery of her own resilience. "The hardest part is knowing I'll survive," she wrote in her brilliant tribute, "Boulder to Birmingham." With her 1975 album, *Pieces of the Sky*, she took up the cause of traditional music.

Her career, say those who know her, has been torn between this traditionalist vision and her label's attempts

to market her as a pop or rock singer. Her occasional pure country albums were sometimes not what Warner Brothers expected, but her public loved them. Along the way, she managed to help rising traditionalists such as the White sisters, whose "angelic" voices she admires, and Ricky Skaggs. In 1985, after what she calls a period of stagnation, she reworked her past into *The Ballad of Sally Rose*.

This traditionalist manifesto gives a poetic rendition of Sally's encounter with The Singer, their estrangement, followed by his death, and her eventual return to his music. ("We called it honky-tonk Gothic," Harris jokes.) But it's also a cultural landmark, repudiating the '60s belief that the past can be ignored and reality rewritten. It gracefully embraces the weight of personal experience, the limits of mortality, and tradition itself. Its tightly rhymed lyrics sum:

I shall not disavow
All these ties that bind me now.
They'll be a diamond, a diamond in my crown.

Back to The Future

Will the traditionalist movement last? Moreover, will it break out of its ethnic and regional boundaries? Its longevity seems assured, at least for this generation, by the quality of young talent attracted to the style. Where once Ricky Skaggs, George Strait, and Reba McEntire dominated the field, and some said there was no one behind them, basic country sounds now percolate through small nightclubs around the United States. The new generation has its own neo-traditionalist songwriters, who are emerging as stars in their own right. The recording companies have been won over, and are aggressively signing contracts. ("A friend told me indignantly the other day that each label now has its token honky-tonker," says Harris. "I said, good, that means more honky-tonkers are getting recording contracts.") The last resisters, complain the singers, are the big, "countrypolitan," middle-of-the-road radio stations.

Yet the main cause of the breakthrough is popular demand. The contracts, tours, and records meet a market, and the question is where this market came from. Nativist ethnicity is only part of the answer. Another element comes from the shift in generations. As the population ages, it gravitates toward a music better suited to the rhythms and concerns of middle age. ("We got a little older and found Haggard and Jones," goes the Bellamy Brothers' song, "Kids of the Baby Boom.") But with this maturity comes the trump card. Traditional music carries with it traditional values. Its younger adherents may ignore the content while reviving the style, but the form, in a way, implies the substance. And the themes of country music—love, loyalty, betrayal, even death—are not the property of any one ethnic group, no matter how deeply rooted in the country. The traditionalists possess the potential for universal appeal. I feel their impact on American culture is just beginning. ■

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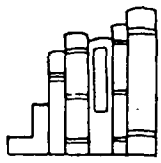
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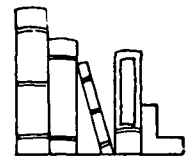
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BOOK REVIEWS



The Faith of a Nonbeliever

Out of Step, by Sidney Hook (New York: Harper & Row, \$29.95).

Reviewed by Richard Grenier

Sidney Hook is a national treasure, a measureless resource, a monument to freedom, democracy, reason, intelligence, courage. He has seen evil. He has seen good. And he has struggled tirelessly and with unsurpassed valor so that in the realm of the mind—in which we must all believe—truth and freedom shall prevail.

It is consequently with dismay and real grief that in his autobiography, *Out of Step*, I came upon the title of the next-to-last chapter, "Twilight Years," which reminded me that Sidney Hook, now 84 years old and only alive because doctors brought him back against his will from a recent and near-fatal illness, will not always be with us. What shall we do without him?

I find compelling every single page of his book, which begins before World War I (in that remote period long gone by when school histories taught that the American "national enemy" was England), and in the destitute slums of Williamsburg, Brooklyn (where Mr. Hook says most Americans under 50 today would cross with no more recognition than if it were a foreign land).

Out of Step successfully recaptures, with all the excitement, the great political-intellectual struggles of our time, in so many of which Sidney Hook was himself a dynamic participant. The book should be read by everyone, particularly the young or those who heard the confused rumblings of battle only from afar, for the struggles are of great moment to us all.

It was fashionable some years back to consider the raging intellectual battles into which Sidney Hook threw himself so wholeheartedly as "squabbles" among petty political sects of New York (predominantly Jewish) intellectuals. But what were these petty squabbles? How to combat Adolf Hitler? The future of China? The problems of socialism? The nature of the Soviet State?

A full 50 years before France's *Nouveaux Philosophes* won world attention with their discovery of the debased and repressive features of Soviet society, Sidney Hook had written extensive critiques of Stalin, Lenin, and the October Revolution. He and his friends wrote about the New Class before Djilas, about the Gulag before Solzhenitsyn. It

is more with sadness than pride that Sidney Hook writes: "If the statesmen of the free world had been familiar with the substance of our 'petty quarrels,' the map of post-World War II might have been different."

Yet he is at strenuous pains to avoid the "cardinal sin" of the autobiographer: the reconstruction of the past, denying or covering up the foolishness or errors of one's previous years so as to cast oneself in a heroic mold. For Sidney Hook made mistakes. In earlier years, he freely admits, he was so carried away by his socialist ideas that he "failed to observe closely" his own country, America, and by constantly focusing on cases of distress or injustice was grievously ignorant of the country's tremendous resources, of its capacity for "democratic self-renewal," and even of the way ordinary Americans west of Staten Island felt.

(But when, in the early 1920s, a Communist organizer with a foreign accent handed him a packet of flyers calling on the "workers of New York" to rise and take power, he had the common sense to dump them in a trash can.)

Sidney Hook explains that socialism—although the most repressive regimes in the world today call themselves socialist—was embraced by him and his youthful comrades because they hoped it would strengthen, not restrain, "the prospects of human freedom." He still considers himself a maverick democratic "socialist." He is an "unreconstructed believer in the welfare state and a steeply progressive income tax," a firm supporter of voluntary euthanasia and abortion, and a proud "secular humanist."

But Sidney Hook no longer believes that the central problem of our time is the choice between capitalism and socialism, but "the defense and enrichment of a free and open society against totalitarianism." A populist in many ways, he rejects strongly the notion, quite widespread in certain elite circles in the West, that the "love of freedom" is restricted to society's literate, professional intellectuals. All too often, Sidney Hook knows full well, this class has made itself the obsequious servant of despotism. Furthermore, he insists, most human beings in the modern world prefer their choices to be not coerced but freely made.

Anathema to the Academy

It is a lugubrious comment on our era that for most of two decades, the 1960s and 1970s (things have somewhat mellowed now), a man like Sidney Hook, who has fought all his life for the common man, for freedom, free speech, the calm, reasoned exposition of all points of view, for

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