

Country Music in Tennessee: From Hollow to Honky Tonk

by Joseph T. Wilson

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Among the less jarring opinions of Tennessee's fire-breathing Parson Brownlow, editor, governor, and Rebel "ventilator," was that the state would "ever be plagued with fleas and fiddlers, singers of morose songs, and the depredations of Old Scratch." Though he clearly disapproved of it, the sour parson was right: Tennessee's favorite music is tenacious. It came in folk form with the first settlers and continues to the present in a variety of styles and contexts from country taverns to Nashville recording studios. An historical example illustrates the linkage from the earliest folk styles to the country music of today.

George Dotson and Henry Skaggs were among the first 18th century "long hunters" to view the sunny glades and hazy ridges of what is now east Tennessee. Today, a community called "Meat Camp" in Watauga County, North Carolina, takes its name from the spot in the Blue Ridge where each fall these far-ranging hunters salted and stored meat before it was carried to settlements east of the mountains. One of the lowest gaps in the Alleghenies, the one they called the "Trade Gap," is five miles from Meat Camp.

Henry Skaggs sought furs beyond the Trade Gap, and his explorations reached 150 miles west into Kentucky. Daniel Boone was a later traveler here and was assisted by Skaggs and his brothers. George Dotson remained near the Trade Gap and made a farm on the Bulldog Branch of Roan's Creek. Some of his descendants still live in Trade, Tennessee, the easternmost community in the state.

George's son Reuben was born in Trade in 1765 and lived there for 104 years. Among remembrances carried by descendants is his comment: "I've lived in four states but have never moved and live in the house I was born in." (Ill-defined boundaries led the first settlers to believe they were in Colonial Virginia, while actually they were in North Carolina, which in turn became the short-lived State of Franklin and ultimately Tennessee.) Reuben loved "the singing of hymns, the old ballit songs, and the playing of the fiddle." How well he loved fiddling and dancing is documented in the minutes of the Cove Creek Baptist Church. Reuben and his wife, Sarah Green, so offended the stern brothers and sisters that they were "sited to meeting" five times between 1811 and 1820. Their promises to sin no more were accepted, but in 1823, "a report taken up against Brother Reuben Dotson and Sister Dotson his wife that they both went to a frolic and stayed all night" resulted in their exclusion from the

church. This conviction, that the fiddle is the devil's box, continues among some Tennesseans, but others have resolved the ancient dispute. Among them is prominent Nashville country musician Ricky Skaggs, a devout Christian and descendant of Henry Skaggs.

The Anglicizing of names has masked the ethnicity of Tennessee's first carriers of country music. In contrast to the widely held view that the early settlers were all of "the purest English stock," George Dotson was of Ulster Irish extraction, and Henry Skaggs was descended from an English mariner. Many who crossed the mountains with the Scotch-Irish and English were of German or French Huguenot descent. The latter included Tennessee's first governor, John Sevier, who, like Reuben, was a devotee of balls and frolics.

The Appalachian dulcimer, derived from the German *Scheitholt* and now almost an emblem of Tennessee mountain culture, was actually rare until the craft revivals of the present century. It was the fiddle that remained the favorite Tennessee instrument until recent times, but highly skilled fiddlers who could play classics like "Rack Back Davy," "Arkansas Traveller," and "Forked Deer" have always been uncommon. On the other hand, the "ballit book" and religious songbook were open to all. Huge outdoor camp meeting revivals that began in 1801 sent a knowledge of hymnody and songbook throughout the Volunteer State in a wave of religious fervor. Within five years these songs and a new way of singing spread throughout the nation and even to Ireland and England—Tennessee's first musical influence beyond its borders.

Tennessee fiddling was modified by popular influences during the second half of the 19th century, principally through traveling circuses and stage shows that featured musical performers. Improved communication brought popular sheet music to the state. But the most important of these influences was the wave of minstrel performance that began in the 1840s and continued into the present century. Handmade banjos fashioned after slave prototypes were in Tennessee before the minstrels, but blackface performers improved on the instrument and developed new ways of playing in ensembles that featured several instruments. The old-time string band and even its modern manifestation, the bluegrass band, is heir to minstrel instrumentation and repertoire. In this way Tennessee country folk have long been in contact with commercial forces that have modified the old ballads, fiddle tunes and sacred music.

Tennesseans and other Americans were "busking" for coins and selling song "ballits" generations before technology made possible a country music industry. That technology was first applied to the music of rural Americans in the 1920s and soon created audiences for recordings, radio broadcasts and stage appearances. At first, Nashville was less important than Atlanta and Chicago as a country music center and largely ignored in the field recording forays of commercial record companies when rural musicians first found their way onto major labels in the 1920s. A single institution, the Grand Ole Opry, made the Tennessee capital a music center. Begun in 1925 and broadcast on the static-free, clear-channel 50,000 watt signal of WSM, it reached much of the United States. Opry founder George D. Hay, with a concern for variety, chose his acts carefully. The first was Uncle Jimmy Thompson, a fiddler with a 19th century style and rep-



Rockabilly music merged old-time country with blues; many of its early folk-based performers went on to careers in country music or rock and roll. Harold Jenkins (Conway Twitty) and his Rock Housers, 1958. Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives, Venice, California

Fiddler Belle Jones and her grandson, Jamestown, Fentress County. Photo by Ray Allen, Tennessee State Parks Folklife Project



Minstrel-influenced early Opry star, Uncle Dave Macon and his son Doris. Photo courtesy Ralph Rinzier



At a fiddler's convention, Mountain City, Johnson County, Tennessee, 1925. (left to right): John Hopkins, Joe Hopkins, A. E. Alderman, John Rector, Uncle Am Stewart, and Fiddling John Carson. Photo by A. E. Alderman, using a time-delay shutter



ertoire. Hays soon added Dr. Humphrey Bate's "hell-for-leather" stringband, the minstrel-influenced banjoist Uncle Dave Macon, barbershop quartets, and, beginning in the 1930s with the addition of "western" to country music, a variety of pseudo-cowboy style bands. Although the Opry in the early years paid virtually nothing to its artists, performers could sell stage appearances and recordings throughout the South, Mid-Atlantic states, and much of the Mid-West, as it became the apex of country music success to be a Grand Ole Opry performer.

Because so many musicians "worked out of Nashville," the first recording studios were built there. Country music with its folk roots was viewed as a specialty item for major companies, worth doing but not significant in the overall business. The best that could happen to a country music "hit" was a "cover" by a popular artist that would increase song publishing royalties. Increases in the expendable income of rural and urban blue collar workers encouraged an annual growth of country music as an industry throughout much of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Part of what came to be called "The Nashville sound" was much influenced by the success of a small group of musicians in Memphis in the mid-1950s. The best known were Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, John R. Cash and Carl Perkins. Their "rockabilly" recordings merged rural Black blues and white "hillbilly" style with an electric studio sound. They, and Black artists such as Howlin' Wolf, B. B. King and Rufus Thomas, were recorded by Sam Phillips and his associates at Sun Records. The immediate popularity of the rockabillys and the later emergence of commercial rock and roll showed recordings produced in Tennessee to be far more than specialty items.

As country music in general moved further from its folk roots, the production of a Nashville record became formulaic. Sharp edges were eliminated, while the goal became a recording that could "crossover" to pop and youth markets. String sections and "doo-wah" choruses were used along with session musicians whose motto was, "Play as little as you can as well as you can."

This synthesis of blues, balladry, and stringband music is still largely the music of working class whites. Its development continues, but the past is recalled especially by well-known traditionalists such as Ricky Skaggs and Bill Monroe. Perhaps more important, much of Tennessee's country music is still for the consumption of local folk—distant from the recording industry—in fiddle contests, church meetings, house parties and honky-tonks.

Suggested reading

Malone, Bill C. *Country Music, U.S.A.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Toches, Nick. *Country: The Biggest Music in America.* New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977.

Wolfe, Charles. *The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years, 1925-35.* London: Old Time Music, 1975.

_____. *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977.

Suggested recordings

Dee and Delta Hicks: Ballads and Songs from the Tennessee Cumberland Plateau (County Records, 789).

Fiddlin' Arthur Smith and His Dixieliners, vols. 1 and 2 (County Records, 546, 547).

G. B. Grayson and Henry Whittier, Early Classics, vols. 1 and 2 (Old Homestead Records, OHCS 157-165).

Nashville, The Early Stringbands, vols. 1 and 2 (County Records, 541, 542).

Uncle Dave Macon (County Records, 521).