

The Evolution of American Cowboy Music

Country music, affectionately known by fans as cowboy music, has a long established history in American music culture, reaching back almost 100 years. Studios began recording country music in the early 1920s, commencing one of the largest music business industries in America.¹ Country music is derived from a long tradition of American music, including folk, bluegrass, and honky tonk styles. These traditions represent real people and embody American history. This essay will discuss the tradition of American folk and its evolution towards other styles, specifically honky tonk and bluegrass, as it relates to two American country songs, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” and “It’s Mighty Dark to Travel.”

American folk music was representative of the people living deep in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina.² This music, written as ballads and embodying early 20th century Anglo-American history, was transmitted via the oral tradition, thus making it not uncommon to encounter several versions of the same song. Honky tonk, also called hillbilly music, evolved from American folk music in the mid 20th century South. Traditional folk ballads shared several characterizing features: “(1) they [focused] on a single situation; (2) they [were] dramatic, in that action [occurred] during the course of the song; and (3) the narrator [was] impersonal, making no judgments.”³ Carrying on the folk ballad tradition of storytelling, the favored honky tonk themes of love, heartbreak, and socially unacceptable issues, such as “adultery, divorce, and drunkenness” continued, making country music relatable to the hearts of Americans.⁴ Honky

1. Ivan M. Tribe, “Country Music,” *Oxford Music Online*, accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/06696?q=country+music&>.

2. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 600.

3. *Ibid.*, 601.

4. *Ibid.*, 740.

tonk music was originally dominated by a ragtime-like piano playing style on pianos that were poorly cared for and out of tune.⁵ This quickly evolved into a popular style, including a full rhythm section and dominated by electric steel guitar and fiddle, unlike the traditional ballads that preferred a solo instrument, such as banjo, guitar, fiddle, or dulcimer.⁶

Kitty Wells (1919-2012), dubbed the “Queen of Country Music,” released “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” in 1952.⁷ While this song shares several characteristics to folk music, such as a female lead singer and folk instruments, there are key variations that exhibit the unique honky tonk style, such as ensemble instrumentation, structure, and the storyline. Instrumentation differed greatly from the folk traditions of one solo instrument: Wells used a full rhythm section, including drums, double bass, and guitar, as well as the common honky tonk solo instruments, electric steel guitar and fiddle. The structure varied from traditional folk in that a chorus is repeated after each verse, a contemporary approach to popular music forms, versus individual stanzas with no repeated refrain, considered to be a ballad or hymn-like form. There was a fiddle solo after the first verse and refrain, suggesting the growing importance of instruments being treated as equals to the singers and derived from the early jazz traditions. The text was written in traditional ballad strophic iambic tetrameter, known as common meter. The storyline was told from the first person perspective, transitioning away from the folk tradition of impersonal narration, as exemplified by the first verse lyrics: “As I sit here tonight, the jukebox playing / The tune about the wild side of life / As I listen to the words you are saying / It brings memories when I was a trustful wife.” Honky tonk established itself as

5. “Honky Tonk,” Wikipedia, last modified July 23, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honky-tonk>.

6. Tribe, “Country Music.”

7. “Kitty Wells Facts,” Junction Recording Studio, accessed August 5, 2016, <http://www.kittywells.com/facts.html>.

a new genre, but its roots were based from its folk tradition through the use of subject matter, instruments, and textual structure.

Just as honky tonk was derived from American folk traditions, bluegrass, otherwise known as “black hillbilly music,” was influenced by African American folk traditions, such as blues and jazz.⁸ Bluegrass was made popular during the folk musical revival of the mid 20th century and can be “seen as a modern *representation* of Appalachian folk music, reconstituted for the concert stage.”⁹ Where honky tonk focused on the strong rhythm section, bluegrass was based around acoustic stringed instruments, such as the “mandolin, five-string banjo, fiddle, guitar, and double bass.”¹⁰ Electronic amplification was distinctly frowned upon for traditional bluegrass music.¹¹ Bluegrass incorporated blues and jazz techniques by implementing instrumental solo sections in between verses, treating the instrument solo and improvisation breakdown as an equal to the melody line and lyrical text.

Bill Monroe (1911-1996), considered to be the father of bluegrass, further defined this “style of country that emphasized instrumental virtuosity, close vocal harmonies, and a fast, driving tempo,” made evident in his song “It’s Mighty Dark to Travel.”¹² The song was characterized by folk song traditions, such as the acoustic instruments and subject matter, and it continued the honky tonk tradition in that more instruments were utilized. However, the use of fast tempos, solos, vocal lines, and spoken word took country music to a new level as it was developed for the stage. The tempo was very fast (155 beats per minute), with virtuoso banjo

8. Charles Wolfe, “Rural Black String Band Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (1990): 32.

9. Crawford, *America’s Music Life*, 742.

10. *Ibid.*, 741.

11. Michelle Kisliuk, “‘A Special Kind of Courtesy’: Action at a Bluegrass Festival Jam Session,” *TDR* 32, no. 3 (1988): 141.

12. James Monroe, “Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys,” Monroe Enterprises, accessed August 5, 2016, <http://www.billmonroe.com/home>.

picking. Monroe sang the lead, noticeable since most folk singers were female, and one of his bluegrass boys sang harmony during the chorus. These vocal features, combined with a fast fiddle solo and spoken words between the verses and solos, created a new level of showmanship and entertainment that cultivated the bluegrass style. Instrumentation involved the five primary bluegrass instruments: mandolin, banjo, fiddle, guitar, and double bass. The form included a repeated chorus (A), a fiddle or banjo solo (b), and three verses (c): AbcAbcAbcAbA. The lyrics, again iambic tetrameter, were written in a first person narrative style, transitioning from the folk tradition in that the singer is telling his own story and not someone else's story: "Many a night we strolled together / Talking of our love so fair / My love for her will never vanish / For I know I'll meet her there." Bluegrass used similar instruments and story themes, but separated itself from the folk tradition through virtuosity, solos, and fast tempos, as it became a concert genre for the stage.

While the foundations of cowboy music can still be found in folk traditions, such as utilized instruments, common meter, and topics of real life issues, early country music expounded upon this tradition through story telling narrative, instrument ensembles, harmonized vocals, virtuosic solos, and more repetitive forms. Country music is music of renovating current traditions, reviving the past, and borrowing from other music, evident as cowboy music continues to speak to the heart of the American people today.¹³

13. Tribe, "Country Music."

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