

THE CRESSSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

December 2008

Vol. LXXIII, No. 2

How I Came to Love (and Hate) Country Music

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ON A CLOUDY DAY EARLY IN 1981, my relationship with country music changed forever. I was tooling around Peoria with my friend Brent in his 1968 Pontiac. The Pontiac had an unusual paint job and an ambiguous history. When I first saw the car, it was a sort of black or showed signs of having once been black. Brent's father purchased the car from Doyle. The story went that Doyle was a little confused by his pain medicine and decided the car needed a new paint job, so he got some interior flat latex paint and a roller and painted the car an off-white. In some environments the splotchy, textured result could have qualified as camouflage. Brent's dad bought the car and his first stop was the Earl Scheib joint on Main Street, where the car was rendered an attractive metallic blue, though the texture of Doyle's drug-addled effort was still apparent.

I know it was cloudy that day because I was manning the Pontiac's AM radio, and I could not tune in WLS, that 50,000 watt AM beacon of rock and roll that radiated across the Midwest from Chicago. For laughs I tuned in 1350 AM, WXCL, a country station. I thought that Brent would howl and immediately forbid country music, thus forcing me to a local popular station with a lower quotient of hard rock than WLS. He did not howl. One of the first songs we heard was Willie Nelson's "Blackjack County Chain." This tune was a mid-chart hit for Willie in the 1960s. It is a story song, and it ends with a repeated fade of "Blackjack County chain," sung by a crew of male background singers, barbershop style. The pomade in their hair is audible.

We screamed with laughter at the song's over-the-top bathos. In the weeks ahead we were unable to remember precisely how many pounds of Blackjack County chain locked the protagonist's leg to the chain gang, but it did not matter. "So he locked my leg in eighty-four tons of Black Jack County chain," we would sing whenever the mood hit us. It became a ready non-sequitur, a favorite inside joke.

The country music stayed on that day.

I have never heard "Blackjack County Chain" on the radio since. I did purchase it a few years later on *The Magic of Willie Nelson* and taped it onto various compilations I made for friends and loved ones over the years.

That cloudy day, country music became an alternative for us as we whiled away our teen years in Brent's car on the west bluff of Peoria, Illinois. Brent grew to like country music; I grew to "like" it. We got familiar enough with country music that we became acquainted with the canon: George Jones, Ronnie Milsap, Hank Jr., Ricky Skaggs, Tammy Wynette, George Strait, Don Williams, and Reba McEntire. This was before Garth Brooks's mega-popularity. I came to love the music of Earl Thomas Conley. Sincerely love it.

Brent went off to the University of Illinois where country music was not seen as exceptional. I attended Northwestern, where it was seen as abhorrent.

We took a trip together in July of 1985, this time in the faux wood paneled station wagon that had replaced Brent's Pontiac. We had some car trouble; the beast would not start for two days, so instead of driving like a bat out of hell to Colorado, climbing Long's Peak, and driving like a bat out of hell back to Chicago, we circled Lake Erie. Again, all we had

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was AM radio, so our choices were talk, “The Music of Your Life,” or country. We split the time between the latter two options. We heard David Allan Coe’s classic, “You Never Even Call Me by My Name” and the Chordette’s “Mr. Sandman” as we cracked wise to each other. Looking back, this trip was our last gasp of adolescence.

When I returned to Evanston for my senior year, I had been vaccinated by country music. I did not hate it; it was more than mere camp. It was familiar and felt like home. Though I still preferred Rush and Billy Squier, and, of course remembering my environment, the Talking Heads, Split Enz, and U2, I tuned into country music more frequently. This had the added bonus of driving my roommate out of his mind! If it did not irritate me and did irritate him, that was a win-win!

My embrace of country music really should not have come as a surprise. My mother is a huge Eddie Arnold fan. He is the number one artist in country music history, but he would have been a great singer in any genre. And the adult contemporary station I listened to in my cavity-prone years played the hits of Glen Campbell, Charlie Rich, and Kenny Rogers. Crystal Gayle’s “Don’t It Make My Brown Eyes Blue” was a huge hit during seventh grade. I even skated a couples’ only moonlight to it with Debbie MacGregor.

I graduated college and moved to Brooklyn, New York, where I shared a two-bedroom apartment with a man I had nothing in common with save the internship program that employed both of us for nine months. My first night in Brooklyn, I tuned in WHN, an AM station that carried the Mets and played country music at all other times. This combination was jarring to me. At my first Mets game, I saw a group of young Hassidic boys whooping it up to John Denver’s “Thank God I’m a Country Boy!” Peanut butter and sand go better together.

I went to Brooklyn because I wanted to live deliberately. Wait, that wasn’t me.

I went to Brooklyn seeking some breathing space between college and seminary, and nurturing a broken heart. I listened to country music, but more importantly, I told all my fellow interns that I listened to country music. When Hank Jr.’s live album came out, I snapped it up, promptly hated it, and shipped it off to Brent. I wrote a lot of letters and kept an informal journal while I lived in Brooklyn. One entry reads “country music because I’m sad.” Looking back on myself at twenty-three, I am pretty sure that at that point country music was iatrogenic to my sadness. My journal entry should have read, “I’m sad because of country music.” Still, I am glad for my familiarity with this most American of art forms.

There is an honesty and self-deprecating humor in country music that I find appealing. In “Small Town Saturday Night,” by Hal Ketchum, the futility of being young, bright, and energetic in a one-horse town is captured beautifully, without being resolved.

Bobby told Lucy, “The world ain’t round...
Drops off sharp at the edge of town
Lucy, you know the world must be flat
‘Cause when people leave town, they never come back.”

I heard Joe Nichols interviewed on the radio a few summers ago. It went something like this,
“Joe, do you have anything new coming out?”

“Yeah, I got one called ‘Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off’ comin’ out next month... I think my mama’s gonna be real proud of me!”

I will take the winking self-effacement of “I Ain’t as Good as I Once Was” by Toby Keith to the chest-thumping bragadocio of Nelly or R. Kelly any day.

As a father, I have found another use for country music. When my sons start to act up in the car I reach for *The Queens of Country Music*, a two CD set which Time-Life churned out a few years ago. Donna Fargo, Jeannie C. Riley, and Barbara Mandrell, among other members of Nashville royalty, hold forth for a whole hour and a half. David and Peter hate it! “Don’t make me play Daddy’s twangy, hick music!” I threaten.

“We’ll be good!” This technique has never failed to restore calm in the Toyota. Still, I wonder if country music will be there for them, when they need to sneer at, or soothe, the broken hearts that will one day surely find them.

There is some hope. One of my going to bed songs for David is “Sunny Side of the Street.” The version I sing is based on Willie Nelson’s from his miraculous *Stardust* album. I have owned this recording for more than twenty-five years. It is the only album I have on vinyl, cassette, and CD. *Stardust* is warm and kind. It is more than aural comfort food. It is my connection to both the great American songbook and the days of my youth, when I sat in the front seat of Brent’s car-of-

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the-week, turning the dial and fantasized about beating my manager at McDonald's to death with thirty-five pounds of Blackjack County chain, Blackjack County chain, Blackjack County chain... †

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