HONKY TONKING

Molly Ivins

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Being hopelessly uncool is the least of the sins of country music. Back when I went to college, listening to Dave Brubeck and Edith Piaf was a fundamental prerequisite for sophistication, on a par with losing your virginity. Knowing a lot of Ernest Tubb songs didn't do squat for the reputation of the aspiring cosmopolite.

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And to be a feminist country music fan is an exercise in cultural masochism. There you are trying to uphold the personhood of the female sex, while listening to "She Got the Gold Mine, I Got the Shaft" or "Don't the Girls All Get Prettier at Closing Time." Women in country music are either saints or sluts, but they're mostly sluts. She's either a "good-hearted woman" or a "honky-tonk angel." There are more hard-hearted women in country music ("I Gave Her a Ring, She Gave Me the Finger"), despicable bimbos ("RunUBY, Don't Take Your Love to Town"), and heartless gold diggers ("Satin Sheets to Lie On, Satin Pillow to Cry On") than the scholars can count. Even the great women country singers aren't much help. The immortal Patsy Cline was mostly lovesick for some worthless heel ("I Fall to Pieces") and Tammy Wynette's greatest contribution was to advise us "Stand by Your Man." (Tammy has stood by several of them.)

Not until the great Loretta Lynn, who is also musically lovelorn with great frequency but shows more spunk about it, did we hear some country songs that can be considered feminist. "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' with Lovin' on Your Mind" is one of Loretta's better ass-kickin' anthems. The high-spirited spoof "Put Another Log on the Fire" is a classic parody of sexism: "Now, don't I let you wash the car on Sunday? Don't I warn you when you're gettin' fat? Ain't I gonna take you fishin' with me someday? Well, a man can't love a woman more than that."

Evidence of the impact of the Women's Movement on country music can be found in the hit song "If I Said You Had a Beautiful Body, Would You Hold It Against Me?"

But this is fairly limited evidence of redeeming social value in the genre. So what do we see in it? For one thing, how can you not love a tradition that produces such songs as "You Done Stompt on my Heart, an' Squished That Sucker Flat?"
(Featuring the refrain “Sweetheart, you just sorta/stompt on my aorta.”) Or “Everything You Touch Turns to Dirt.” Many cultures have popular song forms that reflect the people’s concerns. In Latin cultures the corridos, written by immortal poets such as Garcia Lorca, give voice to the yearnings of the voiceless. In our culture, “Take This Job and Shove It” serves much the same function.

If you want to take the pulse of the people in this country, listen to country-western music. I first knew a mighty religious wave was gathering when I heard ditties like “Drop-kick Me, Jesus, Through the Goalposts of Life.” I also knew the Moral Majority was past its prime and Pat Robertson would go nowhere when I heard “I Wrote a Hot Check to Jesus” on country radio, followed by “Would Jesus Wear a Rolex on His Television Show?”

Contrary to popular opinion, it is not easy to write country songs; many try and fail. One guy who never made it is Robin Dorsey from Matador, Texas. He went to Tech and had a girlfriend from Muleshoe about whom he wrote the love song “Her Teeth Was Stained but Her Heart Was Pure.” She took offense and quit him over it, which caused him to write the tragedy-love song “I Don’t Know Whether to Commit Suicide Tonight or Go Bowling.”

Country music is easily parodied and much despised by intellectuals, but like soaps, it is much more like real life than your elitists will admit. What do most people truly care about? International arms control? Monetary policy? Deconstructive criticism? Hell, no. What they care about most is love (“We Used to Kiss Each Other on the Lips, but Now It’s All Over”). Betrayal (“Your Cheatin’ Heart”). Revenge (“I’m Gonna Hire a Wino to Decorate Our Home”; “Who’s Sorry Now?”). Death (“Wreck on the Highway”). Booze (“Four on the Floor and a Fifth under the Seat”; “She’s Actin’ Single, I’m Drinkin’ Doubles”). Money (“If You’ve Got the Money, Honey, I’ve Got the Time”). Loneliness (“Hello, Walls”). Tragedy-love songs (“She Used My Tears to Wash Her Socks”; “My Bride’s Wedding Dress Was Wash-and-Wear”).

Now here we’re talking major themes. In a song called “You Never Even Called Me by My Name,” which author Steve Goodman labeled “the perfect country-western song,” momma, trucks, trains, and prison are also suggested as mandatory country-western themes.

In this country we waste an enormous amount of time and energy disapproving of one another in three categories where only personal taste matters: hair, sports, and music. We need not review the family trauma, high dudgeon, tsk-tsking, and lawsuits caused over the years by hair and how people wear it. Consider the equally futile expenditure of energy in condemning other people’s sports. And in music, good Lord, the zeal put into denouncing rock, sneering at opera, finding classical a bore, jazz passé, bluegrass fit only for snuff-dippers—why, it’s stupefying. It’s incomprehensible.

I am open to the argument that Ludwig van Beethoven has contributed more great music to the world than has Earl Scruggs. But there is a tiresome neoconservative argument these days that holds relativism responsible for all the evil in the modern world. These folks denounce the abandonment of absolute standards in everything—morality, taste, the postal service. As though the fact that people enjoy reading The Three Musketeers were a menace to Dante. I have felt the sting of their snotty scorn, the lash of their haughty sneers, and what I have to say is “You Are Just Another Sticky Wheel on the Grocery Cart of Life.”
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