

Lock: Counterculture Cowboys

# Counterculture Cowboys:

*Progressive Texas Country of the 1970s & 1980s*

Cory Lock



*Country music undeniably forms a vital and prominent part of Texas culture. Texas country musicians have long been innovators, not only fashioning a distinctive brand of regional music, but also consistently enriching the music and general culture of the American nation as a whole. Artists such as Bob Wills, Gene Autry, Ernest Tubb, Ray Price, Willie Nelson, George Strait, and the Dixie Chicks have become national icons and have helped shape mainstream American perceptions of what it is to be "country."*

Yet while the import of country music within regional and national culture is certain, people are much less decided on what country music means. What is it that makes country country? What does the music as a whole stand for? Is it a nostalgic genre that harkens us back to the good old days of yesteryear? Many people believe so, emphasizing country music's role in preserving what is most traditional in American culture. However, for others country music's magic does not come from references to past times or old-fashioned values. Some are enchanted with the music's structure and instrumentation in itself, the sweet, melancholy melody of a steel guitar, the irresistible dance beat of western swing, the straightforward and familiar rhythms and lyrics of a country ballad. Though nostalgia at times dominates country music's concern with rural life and open spaces, these

The trend to which I refer began in the early 1970s and continued through the mid-1980s. In his *Country Music USA* chapter, "Country Music, 1972-1984," Bill Malone approaches this time period as a coherent unit in which country music and culture drew the attention of the nation as a whole. Country entertainers graced the covers of national news magazines, such as Loretta Lynn in *Newsweek* in 1973, Merle Haggard in *Time* in 1974, and Willie Nelson in *Newsweek* in 1978.<sup>1</sup> In 1975, Robert Altman released the film *Nashville*, bringing the country music world to a nationwide, educated, middle-class audience and suggesting its connection with consumerized and surface-oriented American culture as a whole. Other films followed, featuring established actors in "country" roles. *W. W. and the Dixie Dancekings* (1975), starring Burt Reynolds, and *Outlaw*

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themes have also attracted songwriters concerned with environmentalism or progressive, blue collar politics. The cowboy, often represented in the figure of the Texan, also has an ambivalent mythic past. While many see him as the symbol of traditional justice, others are drawn to his connotations as loner, and at times even outlaw. For some, he is the sheriff that protects and upholds community values; for others, he is a creature of the open range, always outside of and apart from the life and values of mainstream society.

Though country music is a fixture of Texas culture, with roots extending back to the folk music of Anglo settlers during the early days of the Republic, its presence within twentieth-century, mainstream, national culture is subject to more noticeable ebbs and flows. Thus, it is on the national scene, where country music's presence is not always a given, that some of the most dramatic debates have taken place regarding the meaning of country music and the Texas cowboy culture and mythology it often references. The 1970s and 1980s saw just such a dialogue take place, as country moved to the forefront of American popular culture. Journalists, academics, and other cultural critics across the United States discussed country music's ties with what many characterized as an insidious conservative movement. Yet, these critics often ignored these same elements in other forms of American music, such as rock, blues, classic rock, and heavy metal, that often included explicitly racist or misogynistic content. Additionally, at this same moment a country music scene was developing in Texas that defied many stereotypes and demonstrated the often overlooked flexibility of the myths and symbols of country music. This moment in Texan and American history is still important today, as it speaks to the potential of what many characterize as a traditional and conservative genre to articulate the changing values and lifestyles of the twenty-first century.

*Blues* (1977) with Peter Fonda both portrayed country entertainers caught up in criminal activity, while other films glamorized "good old boy" lifestyles, such as *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) with Burt Reynolds, Sally Fields, and country musician Jerry Reed, and *The Electric Horseman* (1979) with Robert Redford, Jane Fonda, and Willie Nelson. On television, programs depicting a range of country culture became national favorites. Several popular country music variety shows began in the 1960s but continued into the 1970s, including *The Porter Wagoner Show* (1960-1979), *The Johnny Cash Show* (1969-1970), and Roy Clark and Buck Owens's *Hee-Haw* (1969-1993). *The Waltons* (1972) and *Little House on the Prairie* (1974) both presented nostalgic versions of rural family life; *Dallas* (1978) brought Texas chic to an international audience, and *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979), narrated by Waylon Jennings, capitalized on *Smokey and the Bandit's* prototype of young men, sexy women, fast cars, and country music.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile on public television, *Austin City Limits* (1976) began to showcase the live performances of a wide range of country music performers to a national audience, a mission that it continues to the present day.

The national fascination with the country music culture continued well into the 1980s. In 1980, Texan Aaron Latham and James Bridges co-wrote the screenplay for *Urban Cowboy* and acquired John Travolta and Debra Winger for starring roles. The film inspired an "urban cowboy" trend in which country dance clubs sprang up across the nation, western clothing found a new popularity from New York to Los Angeles, and country dancing became the latest rage. That same year, Sissy Spacek won an Academy Award for her starring role as Loretta Lynn in *Coal Miner's Daughter*, an adaptation of Lynn's autobiography.<sup>3</sup> Country legend, Dolly Parton was featured in *Nine to Five* (1980), as well as in its television spin-off (1986). She also co-

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Willie, you're  
the greatest!



(Signed)  
ATLANTIC  
RECORDS

Jerry Wexler  
Nick Hunter  
John Fisher  
Pam Romer  
Ann Keener  
Susan Himmel

Enjoy Willie's latest album,  
"Phases & Stages" (Atlantic SD 7291)  
and search for his new single  
with Tracy Nelson,  
"After the Fire Is Gone."

Courtesy of Wayne Beckham Collection at  
Southwest Texas State University

starred with Burt Reynolds in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982), a screen adaptation of Larry L. King's 1977 play. Willie Nelson continued his acting career with acclaimed performances in *Honeysuckle Rose* (1980) and *Barbarosa* (1982), while Kenny Rogers was featured in the television movie, *The Gambler* (1980).<sup>4</sup> *Tender Mercies* (1984), starring Robert Duvall, with its screenplay by Texas writer Horton Foote, received several Academy Award nominations.<sup>5</sup> The widespread popularity of country music also was marked in 1983 with the creation of *The Nashville Network*, a cable channel devoted completely to country music and culture.

As country music culture gained the largest national following in its history, many people linked this cultural trend to changes in American values. Country music superstar, Merle Haggard, for example, in a *New York Times* interview enthusiastically interpreted the upsurge in country music listening as evidence of the American public's renewed sense of national loyalty and traditional values: "I think we're experiencing a feeling of patriotism that hasn't surfaced for a long time . . . and I'm glad to see it . . . Every time patriotism comes to the surface, you'll find country music, cowboys and so on becoming popular."<sup>6</sup> On the opposite end of the spectrum, *Nation* reporter Paul Dickson condemned the country trend and called its songs "a comforting musical antidote to student protest, black militancy and serious debate on the war."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *Harper's* writer Florence King stressed the problem with increasing political invocations of country music: "The mind of the country music fan tends to pounce on anything that resembles a good old-fashioned *reductio ad absurdum*"; King suggested that many country songs of the 1970s were "hymns to the fear of change that is dividing America along strict political, social, and sexual lines, and encouraging all working people to emulate and identify with the very worst sort of Southern reactionaries."<sup>8</sup>

A number of intellectuals provided in-depth analyses of this connection between country music and politics, which almost always expressed deep concern over country music's growing popularity. In his 1985 essay, "Goin' to the Dawgs?: The Rustication of American Culture," folklorist John M. Coggeshall situates the resurgence of country music as part of a nostalgic "rustication" movement he describes as taking place throughout the American nation. He claims that as part of this rustication trend "America, and Americans, seem to be reverting to often blatantly artificial 'country' roots, the place where these [traditional, conservative attitudes toward family, community, and nation] . . . are supposedly enshrined."<sup>9</sup> Coggeshall reads a highly

disparate range of cultural phenomena, including the growing nationwide popularity of country music, television programs and commercials depicting "rural folk," Kentucky Fried Chicken and other "Southern-style" foods, and western-style clothing as part of a national trend in which the white middle class has "banded together to attempt a revitalization of a lost American utopia of personal and social order."<sup>10</sup> The white middle class, Coggeshall claims, perceives the American social order as disrupted by African Americans and other racial minorities, the federal government, and the liberal intelligentsia. Thus, he concludes, "An intensifying appeal of nostalgic

and idealized rural values and lifestyles reflects a deep, pervasive, and ultimately dangerous national mood."<sup>11</sup> The danger of this national mood, Coggeshall suggests, lies specifically in its xenophobic and racist overtones.

Years earlier, Richard Goldstein made one of the most articulate and convincing critiques of the connection between country music culture and political conservatism in his 1973 *Mademoiselle* article, "My Country Music Problem—and Yours." Responding to the nationwide resurgence of country music, particularly in New York City and other urban areas, Goldstein minces no words in summing up his "country music problem":

...I suspect there is something far more sinister to the current embrace of country music by the least likely people, and even a touch of desperation to their imitation of Southern style, as though they were admitting something far more threatening than mere nostalgia, which is the simple fact that the politics of this nation has changed drastically in the past four years, and that as a deliberate consequence of administrative power, the values of Southern, Caucasian, Protestant, suburban, adult Americans have assumed supremacy. That is to say—without flinching, now—Wasps are back at the helm, and the ship is heading full kilter into their particular sunset.<sup>12</sup>

Goldstein's concern is less with Southern Anglo culture in itself, though he admits that "To a New York City Jew there is something intrinsically threatening about the very syntax of country music, not to mention its content,"<sup>13</sup> than with urban progressive audiences adopting the country trend. The heart of his argument is that "no cultural image is truly neutral or divorced from its consequences" (115) and that "one can never

separate the product from the desires it is meant to gratify.<sup>14</sup> In other words, country music is not simply a style or a trend, but a cultural production directly tied to a particular set of values and created in order to satisfy very specific desires even while producing them. When progressive, urban audiences adopt portions of this culture, they reinforce its entire value system. Like Coggeshall, Goldstein stresses the political implications of country music's popularity:

Country music comes equipped with a very specific set of values . . . : political conservatism, strongly differentiated male and female roles, a heavily punitive morality, racism, and the entire constellation of values around which is centered the phrase 'rugged individualism.' To me, it is, truly, the perfect musical extension of the Nixon administration . . . . There is something utterly sinister about the image of Richard Nixon inviting Merle Haggard to sing at the White House. All this has little to do with the real man and his actual taste; this is a political gesture with a very specific ideological intent. The President wishes to identify with the system of values which country music suggests, which is to say a strongly suburban, strongly conservative, strongly Protestant audience which damned well ought to frighten every long-haired progressive urbanite, and every black man who is not part of it.<sup>15</sup>

Here Goldstein articulates the heart of his and most other liberals' problem with country music, its direct and indirect connection with racism. After the 1960s Civil Rights movement, with its struggles for racial equality located specifically in the American South, many progressives saw Southern culture as a whole as tainted. In academia, this attitude was compounded by the increasing hegemony of the political "left" in the humanities. Many people labeled the South as, to use Goldstein's words, "sinister" and "threatening," consumed by a bitter race war marked by segregation, lynchings, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Coggeshall's argument also revolves around this central issue; he sees the rustication trend as a marker of a national xenophobia directed against blacks, hispanics, Asians, and anyone else marked as a "foreigner."

Yet in examining American, and Texan, country music, it is important to qualify any broad connections between country music culture and political conservatism. Goldstein correctly notes Nixon's unlikely affiliation with country music. Both Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash performed for Nixon at the White House, and president Nixon also attended the ceremonial opening of the new Grand Ole Opry House. During a speech in Nashville he explicitly spelled out what he saw as the ideological affiliations of country music, claiming "The peace of the world . . . is going to depend on our character, our belief in ourselves, our love of our country, our willingness to not

only wear the flag but to stand up for the flag, and country music does that!"<sup>16</sup> Nixon was not the only conservative president to consciously identify with country music. Ronald Reagan, who had his own associations with country culture through his earlier acting career, frequently invited Merle Haggard and other country entertainers to perform at the White House and attended the Country Music Association's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration.<sup>17</sup>

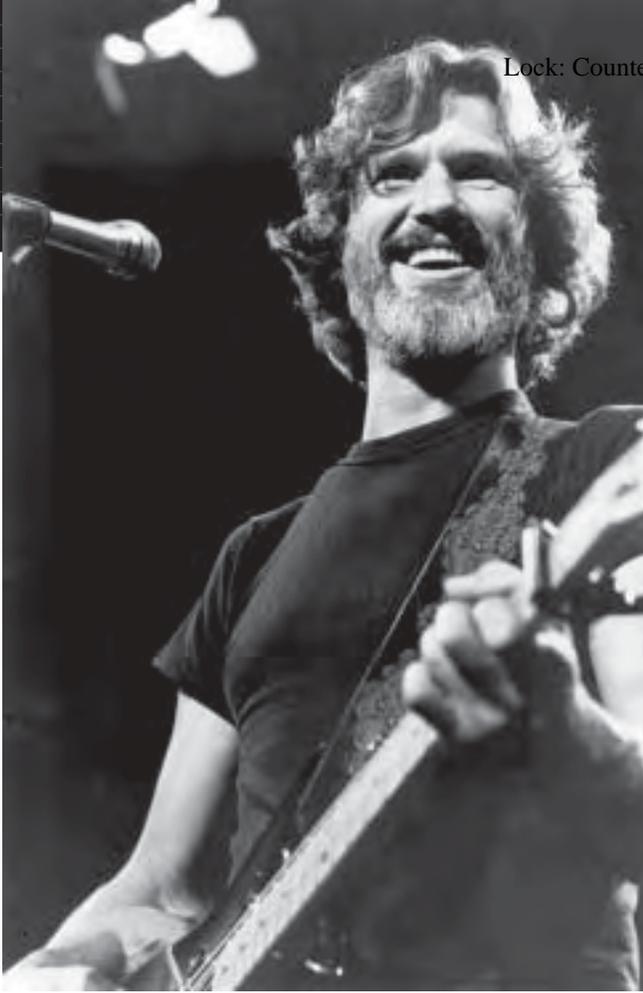
However, country musicians' political affiliations were by no means limited to conservative administrations. Lyndon Johnson began the tradition of bringing country music to the White House, and his social events often featured country performers, such as the Geezinslaw Brothers.<sup>18</sup> Later, Jimmy Carter expressed a deep appreciation of country music, at times appearing on stage with performers at social functions and even occasionally singing a portion of a song. The Allman Brothers, Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, Tom T. Hall, Hank Snow, and Willie Nelson were all not only regulars at presidential events but also active participants in Carter's presidential campaigns.<sup>19</sup> The diversity of country musicians' political affiliations suggests the flexibility of this culture to invoke an array of values, rather than a strict union with the political right.

Goldstein's connection of country music culture to conservatism, then, is not a natural equivalence, though it may point to a rhetorical trend. Several other analysts of country music have made this same argument. According to *New York Times* columnist Robert Palmer's 1981 evaluation of the country music upsurge of the previous decade:

The popularity of country music may be tied to burgeoning conservatism. But this does not mean that country music itself is inherently conservative. The music's core audience has always been white and working class, but in recent years black singers have become country stars, and the country audience has expanded to include listeners whose social and economic backgrounds range across the spectrum.

During the last five years or so, a number of country hits have dealt explicitly with changing social and sexual mores—more explicitly than older country music, and often more explicitly than most contemporary rock and soul. If country generally espouses traditional American values, they are values of the most basic sort—self-reliance, the willingness to work hard, the importance of trusting and acting on one's deepest feelings.<sup>20</sup>

Bill Malone likewise finds country music's association with conservatism "an ironic development in that the similar 'discovery' of white folk music in the thirties had been fueled by an awakening of liberal sentiment."<sup>21</sup> He points out that during the period of 1972-1984,



Kris Kristofferson. Photo by Scott Newton, courtesy of Leon Carter Collection, Texas Music Museum.

country music's political stance remained difficult to categorize. Musicians voted both Democratic and Republican and stayed as free of ideological postures as did most Americans. Some performers leaned toward Reagan, but others supported the Democratic cause. Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Jessi Colter, Dottie West, and Kris Kristofferson, among others, participated in the giant Democratic fund-raising telethon in May 1983.<sup>22</sup>

The 1970s showed evidence of gradual, but nonetheless marked, changes taking place in the value system of country music as songs began to address drug culture, criticize the Vietnam war, advocate the women's movement, and expose racism. Several performers openly referenced drug culture in their songs, and Gram Parsons and the other members of the Flying Burrito Brothers went so far as to rework the Nudie suit, a fashion institution in country music, choosing sequined marijuana leaves for their brightly colored attire, in place of the traditional cactus plants and wagon wheels.<sup>23</sup> Tom T. Hall criticized the Vietnam War from the perspective of a disabled veteran in "Mama Bake a Pie (Daddy, Kill a Chicken)."<sup>24</sup> Loretta Lynn wrote and sang a number of songs criticizing women's fates in "traditional" society and advocating various forms of liberation. Some of her most memorable are "Don't Come Home a Drinkin' (With Lovin' On Your Mind)," "One's On the Way," and, of course, "The Pill," which celebrates the control and sexual freedom the birth control pill brought to women's lives. The

often right-wing Merle Haggard also popularized "Irma Jackson," a sympathetic portrayal of interracial love, while Tanya Tucker called for harmony between Southern blacks and whites in "I Believe the South is Gonna Rise Again."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the biggest example of changing attitudes in country music was the success of black country singer, Charley Pride, who won multiple Grammy Awards and was named Entertainer of the Year by the CMA in 1971.<sup>26</sup> Inarguably country music contains major conservative and traditionalist strains; however, these elements come nowhere close to constituting its essence.

Yet even among all these changes in national country music, the Texas music scene of the 1970s and 1980s stood out as producing a remarkable number of artists who sought to innovate and cross boundaries, rather than cling to past values and traditions. Austin, the focal point of Texas music and a national music hot spot in its own right, nourished a particularly progressive country music environment during this time period, a culture in which most criticism of the conservative nature of country music culture simply did not apply. The foundation for Austin's brand of "progressive country" was laid during the late 1950s and 1960s when singer and yodeler Kenneth Threadgill encouraged an eclectic atmosphere in his bar and thereby nourished Austin's developing music scene. At Threadgill's, working-class locals mixed with college students to listen to and perform an eclectic mix of country-inspired music, "everything from hoary hillbilly material (like that of the Carter family) to bluegrass, blues, traditional ballads, and Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan songs."<sup>27</sup> Janis Joplin, perhaps the most famous musician from the Threadgill's scene, moved to the West Coast, but a number of other musicians raised in this crossover atmosphere remained in the Austin area.

Throughout the 1970s, the Armadillo World Headquarters functioned as the central venue for an emerging counterculture that supported a rock-influenced version of country music.<sup>28</sup> Though a few veteran country music performers, such as Kenneth Threadgill, Floyd Tillman, and former Texas Playboy Jesse Ashlock remained in Austin in the 1970s and 1980s, its country music was dominated by up-and-coming musicians, such as Guy Clark, Steve Fromholz, Michael Martin Murphey, Rusty Wier, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Bob Livingston, Gary P. Nunn, Townes Van Zandt, Marcia Ball, Doug Sahm, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Willie Nelson.<sup>29</sup> On the periphery of the Austin scene (as he spent much time in New York performing at *its* progressive country venue, the Lone Star Cafe), was the irreverent Kinky Friedman and his band, the Texas Jewboys (who seem like an embodied rebuttal of Goldstein's claim about the categorical incompatibility of country music and Jews). And while the Armadillo music could definitely be described as counterculture, it was not simply a local anomaly, isolated from the world of mainstream country. In addition to Nelson, many other national, mainstream country artists frequented its stage, including Gram Parsons, Bill Monroe, and Earl Scruggs.<sup>30</sup>

"Cosmic cowboy," "redneck rock," and "progressive country," the most common labels of this style that had come to the

forefront of Austin country music, all suggest the influence of the counterculture rock scene on both its music and ideology. Though it is often difficult to categorize the mindset and political leanings of all the practitioners of a style of music, the affiliation of these “cosmic cowboys” with liberal counterculture was clear in both their outward appearance and their world views. Archie Green describes the country culture of Austin in the mid-1970s as a scene in which “fans tied ‘cowboy’ directly to long hair, dope, revival folk-song, cliché-laden poetry, and pop astrology.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, the progressive nature of the scene went beyond surface-level stylings. The Austin scene’s openness to music and culture outside the domain of traditional country can be seen in the variety of performers at the Armadillo, its central venue. In addition to

hosting local and national country acts, the Armadillo also showcased such musically and racially diverse acts as reggae singer Jimmy Cliff; zydeco accordionist and singer Clifton Chenier; and blues artists Ry Cooder, Mance Lipscomb, and Lightnin’ Hopkins.<sup>32</sup>

These long-haired, bell-bottomed cowboys also explicitly articulated liberal political leanings. Jan Reid calls their work “a songwriter’s poetry of homecoming, celebration of nature, and intelligent soul searching.”<sup>33</sup> Many of their songs, such as Kris Kristofferson’s “Sunday Morning Coming Down” (popularized by Johnny Cash) and John Clay’s “Plastic Plowboy” addressed the drug culture that penetrated the progressive country scene. Kris Kristofferson also sang “Good Christian Soldier,” a song written by another Texan, Billy Joe Shaver, that has been called “the most moving, as well as the most

powerful antiwar song of the 1970s.”<sup>34</sup> Michael Martin Murphey’s “Cosmic Cowboy,” the song “Plastic Plowboy” parodies, vaguely articulated his and his fans’ hippie lifestyle with lines celebrating “Lone Star sippin’,” “skinny dippin’,” and “acting strange.”<sup>35</sup> However, *Geronimo’s Cadillac*, the album released by Murphey a year earlier addressed the more serious issues of Native-American rights and environmentalism. Kinky Friedman definitely strove to shock his audiences in songs such as “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore,” yet his inflammatory lyrics also at times

contained radical political messages, such as his condemnation of fascism in “Ride ‘Em Jewboy.”<sup>36</sup> Jerry Jeff Walker’s “Mr. Bojangles” gives a sympathetic treatment of a very nontraditional country music subject, the life of a black New Orleans street dancer.<sup>37</sup> And Ray Wylie Hubbard’s “Up Against the Wall Redneck Mother” directly attacks the ignorance and closed-mindedness of redneck country culture.

While Austin functioned as the center of Texas’s music scene, Lubbock’s innovative contributions to Texas country music during the 1970s and 1980s cannot be ignored. A number of venues were important to the Lubbock scene, including Stubbs’ Barbecue Restaurant, Fat Dawg’s, Main Street Saloon, and Coldwater.<sup>38</sup> The Cotton Club, a Lubbock institution for several decades, featured an unusual crowd reminiscent of Austin’s Threadgill’s and Armadillo:

some . . . had been dancing in honky-tonks and clubs for years, while others were a younger group of musicians and others that could have been characterized as “hippies.” This unusual mix of “redneck” and “hippie” must have seemed even more improbable in West Texas, whose image was and is conservative. This scene provided musicians a unique test audience on which to try their music.<sup>39</sup>

Joe Carr and Alan Munde describe the same sort of genre-blending taking place in Lubbock music during this period: “An open dialogue among jazz, pop, blues, bluegrass, and country musicians facilitated the development in West Texas of hybrid musical styles such as western swing, rock and roll, and country-rock.”<sup>40</sup> John Denver began his musical career in Lubbock and Fort Worth during this period, where he became a star playing another form of crossover music, country-folk.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most famous musicians from the Lubbock scene, known both as a group and individually for their unique songwriting and boundary-breaking country music, are Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock. In 1971 they formed the Flatlanders and produced a critically praised, but commercially unsuccessful album under the same name. Yet by 1972 the group disbanded, and



Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys at the Armadillo World Headquarters. March 27, 1973. Photo by Burton Wilson.



Joe Ely. Courtesy of BSG Monument, Leon 6 Carter Collection, Texas Music Museum.

Gilmore soon moved to Denver to study eastern philosophy and dropped out of the music scene until 1980, when he relocated to Austin to again focus on his music career.<sup>42</sup> Butch Hancock likewise left Lubbock shortly after the Flatlanders broke up, living in Clarendon and Austin, where he continued to write songs and record on his Rainlight label.<sup>43</sup> Joe Ely continued to perform his brand of rock-influenced country in Lubbock

Promising Male Vocalist award in 1975. Fender displayed an even more dramatic crossover style than Rodriguez, recording a number of bilingual versions of standard country songs, such as his 1975 hit single, "Before the Last Teardrop Falls."<sup>48</sup> The popularity of all these artists suggests the flexibility of Texas country music throughout the 1970s and early 1980s and the ability of audiences inside and outside of Austin to embrace

## *Two Chicano performers, Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender, also became stars on the national country scene during the 1970s.*

throughout the 1970s and 1980s, where he produced a number of albums featuring compositions by himself, Gilmore, and Hancock. His music was described by his steel guitarist, Lloyd Maines, as "mind-boggling" and owed much to its extended instrumental solos by an eclectic mix of musicians, including blues guitarist Jesse Taylor and blues-rock-influenced accordionist Ponty Bone.<sup>44</sup> The Maines Brothers Band, composed of Lloyd, Steve, Kenny, and Donnie Maines, was also an important presence in Lubbock throughout the 1970s, as was singer/songwriter Terry Allen and his Panhandle Mystery Band (which included three of the Maines brothers).<sup>45</sup> Combining the ideals of Lubbock's "alternative lifestyle" with country music were Tommy and Charlene Hancock, who with their children Traci, Conni, and Joaquin performed as The Supernatural Family Band.<sup>46</sup> Though never as nationally recognized as the Austin country music scene, Lubbock was nonetheless a distinct cultural center of its own that, like Austin, encouraged genre-blending and the combination of traditional elements of Texas country with modern viewpoints and lifestyles.

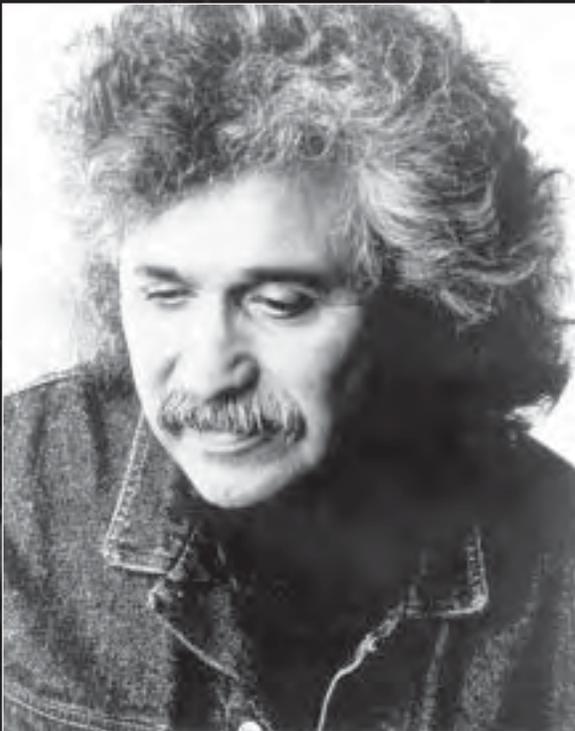
Outside of or reaching beyond the Austin and Lubbock scenes, a number of other Texas country singers displayed their own sort of liminal, progressive, or crossover status. While some Texans, such as George Jones, Barbara Mandrell, the Gatlin Brothers, and Tanya Tucker, became an integral part of the Nashville scene, others remained on its edge to various degrees. The term "outlaw music" was applied to a loose association of singers dominated by Texans such as Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Billy Joe Shaver, and Kris Kristofferson. The Nelson and Jennings duet, "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys," expresses the theme common to all the outlaw artists, their marginality from mainstream society. Two Chicano performers, Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender, also became stars on the national country scene during the 1970s. Rodriguez's strongest musical influence was Merle Haggard, and most of his music expressed this traditional honky-tonk country sound, although he occasionally mixed in Spanish verses. His songs, such as "North of the Border" and "Ridin' My Thumb to Mexico," consistently topped the Nashville charts throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>47</sup> Fender was equally popular on the national scene, winning the Association of Country Music's Most

musicians breaking, as opposed to reinforcing, social norms.

The progressive country scene of the 1970s and 1980s is important in its own right as a key piece of Texas music history. Many of the artists who dominated Texas country over two decades ago are still making headlines today. Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock, all of whom built names for themselves after the Flatlanders' short period of cohesion in the early 1970s, have reunited as the Flatlanders and recently released a new disc, *Now Again*. Charlene Hancock, Conni Hancock, and Traci Lamar of the Supernatural Family Band play regularly in Austin as the Texana Dames. Guy Clark, Steve Fromholz, Rusty Wier, Gary P. Nunn, Marcia Ball, Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Freddy Fender, Ponty Bone, Billy Joe Shaver, Willie Nelson, and many other musicians from the 1970s and 1980s country music scene remain active and quite influential in the Texas music scene today.

In addition to the progressive country legacy of this period surviving through the music of veteran performers, new Texas artists continue to voice progressive politics and to test the boundaries of the country genre with their innovations. One major group of these alternative country artists are what some call the "new" or "renegade" traditionalists.<sup>49</sup> Many of these artists have actively rejected contemporary, Nashville-style, mainstream country music as overproduced, too commercialized, and, in a nutshell, inferior to the country of the 1940s-1970s (for a to-the-point summary of this position, try listening to Dale Watson's "Country My Ass"). Harkening back to legends such as Bob Wills, Buck Owens, Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, and Merle Haggard, new traditionalists could be said to be conservative in that they perpetuate the lyrical themes and musical styles of past performers, rather than adapting the conventions of today's mainstream country. Yet many of these bands and artists, such as The Derailers, The Hollisters, Junior Brown, the Cornell Hurd Band, Lyle Lovett, and Ted Roddy do not simply replay the past, but rework traditional music to appeal to modern audiences. In addition to musical innovations, such as Junior Brown's guitar work (he has not only come up with new sounds, but has designed and mastered a whole new hybrid instrument, the double-necked electric and steel "guit-steel" guitar), new traditionalists have reworked songs from outside the country

Doug Sahm, May 6, 1973. Photo by Burton Wilson.



Freddy Fender. Courtesy of Refugio Management, Inc. *Journal of Texas Music History*, Vol. 3, Iss. 1/3, Texas Music Museum.



Freda and the Firedogs at the Split Rail. September 16, 1972. Photo by Burton Wilson.

genre (such as the Derailers' version of Prince's "Raspberry Beret," Chaparral's cover of the Cure's "Just Like Heaven," or Two Tons of Steel's version of the Ramones' "I Wanna be Sedated"). While many of their lyrics hearken back to the symbols and themes of decades past, renegade traditionalists have nonetheless shown considerable lyrical innovation, such as Billy Joe Shaver's "Mothertrucker," which reverses the traditional gender dynamic of truck driving songs to chronicle the story of a man left behind by a "lean, mean mother trucker"; in "Truckin' Queen," Dale Watson sings of a transvestite CB radio enthusiast.

The rock/country mix popularized by the redneck rock of the 1970s and 1980s also continues in progressive country bands of today. Perhaps the most radical subgenre of alternative country, "cowpunk" or "country punk" became prominent in Texas music in the 1980s and 1990s with bands such as Killbilly, The Cartwrights, and The Bad Livers, but it continues strong today in groups such as the Old 97's, T. Tex Edwards and the Swingin' Kornflake Killers,<sup>50</sup> the Damnations, Slobberbone, and the Meat Purveyors. Even more prominent in Texas country today is the subgenre most closely tied to the redneck rock of the 1970s and 1980s, roots rock. Groups such as The Shakin' Apostles, Reckless Kelly, Owen Temple, The Groobies, the Lucky Pierres, Beaver Nelson, the Gourds, and Lucinda Williams combine roots influences from folk, bluegrass, blues, and country music with contemporary rock sounds. Many of these cowpunk and roots rock artists are the most powerful songwriters in country music today, with lyrics expressing a progressive edge, such as Owen Temple's "Move Around Money," a scathing critique of corporate America, the Groobies' "My Best Feature" a feminist celebration

of a woman's personality, brains, and skill over physical traits, and The Meat Purveyors' stark condemnation of spousal abuse.

Yet, perhaps the most drastic change in the progressive country scene in the last decade has been the long-awaited arrival of women to the landscape of Texas country music. While country music outside of the Lone Star State included female voices since its inception as a commercial entity (think of the Carter Family, Patsy Montana, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Tammy Wynette, to name just a few), Texas country music history has been noticeably void of female performers. Ruby Owens, Charlene Arthur, Goldie Hill, and Jeannie C. Riley achieved moderate fame from the 1920s through the 1960s,<sup>51</sup> and Marcia Ball was a formidable presence in the 1970s alternative country scene as the lead singer of Freda and the Firedogs, but the stars of Texas country music have been, as a whole, overwhelmingly male. A few other women with Texas roots, such as Barbara Mandrell and Tanya Tucker, did make the "big time," but this was generally by removing themselves from the Texas music scene and entrenching themselves in Nashville. Today, however, things are noticeably different as women artists increasingly bring a female, and feminist, perspective to the Texas country scene. There are, of course, America's sweethearts, the Dixie Chicks, whose "Earl's Gotta Die" recently gained national attention; their expert musicianship, good looks, and bold attitude have had a wide range of female and male listeners repeating their marketing slogan, "Chicks Rule." The list of Texas women bringing their perspectives to the forefront of country music is, thankfully, too long to encompass here, but it includes names such as Amy

Boone and Deborah Kelly of the Damnations, Charlene and Conni Hancock and Traci Lamar of the Texana Dames, Toni Price, Nanci Griffith, Alison Krauss, the Damnations, Kimmie Rhodes, Kelly Willis, Marti Brom, Rosie Flores, The Sisters Morales (Roberta and Lisa), Susanna Van Tassel, Penny Jo Pullus, Karen Poston, Teri Joyce, Libbi Bosworth, Caroline Herring,

and Lucinda Williams. They, like all the renegade traditional, cowpunk, roots rock, psychobilly, and other alternative country artists of today, remind us just how far Texas country has come from its days as a boys-only club and the time, just a few decades ago, when the genre's fixity as an essentially politically conservative genre was being seriously debated. ■



Audience at the Armadillo World Headquarters, May 5, 1979.  
Photo by Burton Wilson.

## NOTES

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32. *Ibid.*, 168.
33. Jan Reid, "Who Killed Redneck Rock?" *Texas Monthly* 4 (December 1976): 211.
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35. Green, 170-171.
36. *Ibid.*, 186.
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38. Joe Carr and Alan Munde, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights: The Story of Country Music in West Texas* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995), 173.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 161.
41. Willoughby, 104.
42. Carr and Munde, 167.
43. *Ibid.*, 168.
44. *Ibid.*, 164.
45. *Ibid.*, 171.
46. *Ibid.*, 168-169.
47. Willoughby, 108.
48. Malone, 312.
49. For more on "new" or "renegade" traditionalists and cowpunk, see "Chapter Seven: Renegade Traditionalists and Country Punk" of Rick Koster's *Texas Music*, 69-82.
50. Koster, 79-82.
51. Koster, 31-33.