

Topic Page: [Country music](#)

Definition: **Country music** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable*

A form of popular or folk music originating in the southern states of the United States in the early 20th century. It can be ultimately traced back to British immigrants who brought with them a tradition of narrative Celtic ballads and string instrument playing, especially fiddling, and came to be known by different genre names depending on dominant elements or geographical factors. See *also* Bluegrass; Country and western; Hillbilly.

Summary Article: **Country Music**

From *Music in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Encyclopedia*

Country music is a genre that developed out of the folk traditions of primarily white, working-class Americans living in the rural south and Appalachia. It is a blend of Anglo-Celtic fiddle tunes, traditional ballads, cowboy songs, and African American blues and work songs. Over the years, country music has also incorporated elements of jazz, rock, and the music of other ethnic groups. While it was once considered a regional genre, radio and recordings transformed it into a national one by the 1940s, and by the mid-1990s, country music accounted for nearly one-fifth of record sales and was the fastest-growing radio format in the United States.

Roots and the Early Years

The roots of country music can be traced to folk traditions of the rural American south and southwest. Ballads and fiddle tunes from the British Isles had undergone significant Americanization by the beginning of the 20th century. Other bodies of music were also incorporated into the repertoires of these musicians, including African American blues and work songs, gospel hymns and revival spirituals, cowboy songs, native ballads, and popular songs from the minstrel and vaudeville stage. The performers were generally amateurs, although some, like Fiddlin' John Carson, Uncle Dave Macon, and Gil Tanner and His Skillet Lickers achieved a level of local or regional popularity.

In the 1920s, technology created an opportunity for "old-time" performers to experience more widespread fame. Record companies began to send engineers into parts of the south to record local musicians. Initially, these records were categorized as "hillbilly" music, a label that included a wide range of musical styles but was largely based around music using guitars, fiddles, banjos, and mandolins, with singers who sang with a loud, nasal, chest voice. In 1927, Victor Records released recordings by two artists responsible for establishing country music as a significant popular music genre: the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. In addition to being the first commercially successful country artists, they also served to establish some of country's distinctive sound. The Carter Family, consisting of Alvin Pleasant "A. P." Carter, his wife Sara, and his sister-in-law Maybelle, established the model for harmony singing. Maybelle's distinctive style of playing a melody with her thumb on the low strings of the guitar while playing accompaniments with her fingers on the higher strings was soon imitated by other artists. Jimmie Rodgers is credited with introducing the "blue yodel" into country music. Rodgers's yodel was said to be an imitation of a lonesome train whistle. By the time of his death in 1933, yodeling was a characteristic vocal flourish in country music.

Radio stations also began broadcasting programs of live music in the 1920s, and while these stations

were located in urban areas, they often included programs that catered to the rural populations they serviced as well. These broadcasts were often designed to imitate typical rural community entertainments known as barn dances. Two of the most successful programs were the *National Barn Dance* (WLS, Chicago) and the *Grand Ole Opry* (WSM, Nashville, Tennessee). The “clear channel” status of both stations enabled these programs to be heard throughout most of the American southeast, Midwest, and parts of Canada. In the 1930s, other markets began broadcasting their own barn dances; two of the most significant were the WWVA Jamboree (WWVA, Wheeling, West Virginia) and the Renfro Valley Barn Dance (WLW, Cincinnati, Ohio).

From Regional to National

The cowboy image in country music became increasingly popular in the 1930s. This was due in part to the popularity of western-themed movies that often featured a “singing cowboy.” Stars like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Tex Ritter popularized the image of the independent, free-spirited cowboy singing songs intended to capture a romanticized image of the American southwest. For audiences, the cowboy was a more noble and respectable image than the hillbilly, so many artists began to adopt the cowboy hat and western-styled clothing.

In the mid-1930s, some string bands in Texas and Oklahoma began to include elements of jazz to create a style known as western swing. This style combined the cowboy themes and fiddles of country with the more boisterous sounds of swing, including the use of horn sections, pianos, and drums. Some of these western swing bands, like Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys and Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies, also incorporated the Hawaiian steel guitar, an instrument that would become synonymous with the country sound.

World War II aided the broad dissemination of country music. Soldiers from rural areas stationed abroad introduced the music to their compatriots from other regions. The Armed Forces Radio Network often used country music to represent “home” and instill a sense of patriotism in listeners. Even back home in the United States, the migration from the rural south to more industrial cities facilitated the spread of country music around the nation.

The postwar years marked a time of change for country music. Bluegrass developed as a modernization of the older string band music. The style codified by Kentucky mandolin player Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys emphasized Monroe's “high lonesome” vocal style and virtuosic instrumental playing. Western swing was being replaced by honky-tonk in many dance halls. Honky-tonk blended the fiddle and steel guitar of traditional country with electric guitars, upright bass, and sometimes piano, and reflected the disillusionment of urbanization and a move away from the “safe” entertainment of the barn dances. The lyric themes of lost love, infidelity, and hard times were directed at younger audiences. One of the biggest stars of honky-tonk was Hank Williams, whose songs like “Your Cheatin’ Heart” and “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” illustrated a move away from the carefree and optimistic songs of earlier generations. By the end of the 1940s, country music was establishing itself in Nashville. Songwriter Fred Rose and musician Roy Acuff founded Acuff-Rose Publishing in 1942, and several record labels began to open offices in the city to take advantage of the proliferation of recording studios.



A publicity portrait of Hank and Audrey Williams for MGM Records, circa 1952. Hank Williams was one of the biggest stars of honky-tonk; his songs such as "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" signaled a move from the optimistic songs of earlier generations.

Popularization of Country

In the 1950s, country music faced competition for its younger audience from rockabilly. Rockabilly blended country music with the danceable energy of rhythm and blues and was a significant factor leading to the development of rock and roll. Popularized by performers like Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Buddy Holly, rockabilly attracted not only a younger audience but also younger performers like Johnny Cash and George Jones.

While these producers recognized the need to modify country's sound to make it more appealing to a wider audience, the African American roots of rhythm and blues were still suspect in the minds of the predominantly white country audience. The new approach these producers chose replaced some of the regional characteristics of the country sound with those of mainstream pop. The banjo, fiddle, and steel guitar were replaced by acoustic guitars and lush string sections. The rural two- and three-part harmony singing popularized by the Carter Family was replaced by choral harmonies of small groups of backup singers. Successful Nashville Sound artists included Jim Reeves, Eddy Arnold, Jimmy Dean, Marty Robbins, and Patsy Cline. These artists represented a significant change in country music, away from its rural, homespun roots toward a more upscale and sophisticated middle-class audience. This shift was also demonstrated in the appearance of the artists who traded in their cowboy hats and western attire for tuxedos and evening gowns.

In the wake of this development, a group of musicians around Bakersfield, California, began playing a style that returned to the brash sound of honky-tonk with a rock and roll edge. Buck Owens and Merle Haggard created a style that was the antithesis of the smooth Nashville Sound and featured the electrified sound and driving rhythms of rock and roll and songs laced with a defiant pride and individualism that even related back to country music's cowboy roots.

Television also brought country music into mainstream popular culture during the 1960s. Former Blue

Grass Boys Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs created a hit with their theme song for *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *The Andy Griffith Show* regularly featured music segments, including several episodes that featured the Dillards. Several popular singers, like Porter Wagoner, Glen Campbell, and Johnny Cash, transitioned to television and hosted their own variety shows starting in the 1960s. In 1969, CBS launched *Hee Haw*, a one-hour variety show featuring country music and an exaggerated portrayal of rural southern life.

Country music's increased exposure during the 1960s placed many artists in a position to address the changing culture around them. Some of the female artists who had risen in prominence in the 1960s and 1970s were thrust into the struggle between the shifting gender roles promoted by the women's liberation movement and the traditional family dynamic championed by their largely conservative fan base.

The tension between Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" and Loretta Lynn's "Shoe Goes on the Other Foot Tonight" reflects this changing mind-set. In 1975, Lynn had a hit with the song "The Pill," a somewhat lighthearted proclamation of a woman's decision to take control of her sexuality and her relationship through the use of contraceptives. Many times this tension was acted out in the male/female duets, such as Loretta Lynn and Ernest Tubb's "Sweet Thing" and George Jones and Tammy Wynette's "Two-Story House."

Crossing Over

The country music of the 1970s is often referred to as "classic" country because it reintroduced some of the characteristic sounds, like fiddles and steel guitars. The most successful singers of the era were the established singers like George Jones, Conway Twitty, Kenny Rogers, and Charley Pride. Pride is also one of the few African Americans to achieve lasting success in country music. While there was a return to some of country's roots, the music was still dominated by the Nashville Sound and the powerful record labels based in the city. To escape that influence, several younger musicians moved to the growing music scene in Austin, Texas, where honky-tonk and western swing were blending with the music and ideologies of the countercultural hippie communities that had settled there in the 1960s, giving rise to "outlaw country." Outlaw country artists like Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Johnny Paycheck embraced an antiestablishment mindset in their music and lyrics. Similarly, some musicians found a sympathetic ideology and sound in the southern rock of Lynyrd Skynyrd and Molly Hatchet. Artists like Charlie Daniels and Hank Williams, Jr., championed working-class southern values and pride in songs like "Country Boy Can Survive" and "The South's Gonna Do It Again."

The late 1970s and early 1980s trended toward "countryopolitan" music, a crossover style that blurred the lines between country and mainstream pop. Barbara Mandrell, Ronny Milsap, and Dolly Parton had hits with songs on both pop and country charts. In 1983, Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers's duet "Islands in the Stream," written by members of the disco group the Bee Gees, reached number one on both the pop and country charts. Bands like Alabama merged the close-harmony singing style popularized by the Statler Brothers and the Oak Ridge Boys with the pop-rock band sound. Alabama was also one of the first country bands.

By the mid-1980s, country musicians again set out to find their musical roots, which led to neotraditional country. Artists like George Strait, Dwight Yoakam, Randy Travis, and Reba McEntire put the "twang" back in the music while playing up the cowboy and honky-tonk images. In the late 1980s, artists like Garth Brooks infused the neotraditional movement with the energy of arena rock and soon country

artists were playing in and selling out stadiums like the major rock bands of the day.

The rise of music video channels in the 1980s, such as MTV, VH1, and the country-oriented CMT, enabled consumers to associate music with a visual image. In the case of country music, one of those visual images was choreographed dancing known as line dancing. Line dancing represents a merging of folk and popular cultures. Many country line dances, such as the Electric Slide, were borrowed and modified from disco. The commercial success of Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy Breaky Heart" launched line dancing into the mainstream of pop culture, and the Brooks and Dunn hit "Boot Scootin' Boogie" spawned more than a dozen different dances.

Reinventing Country

The early 1990s were a peak in the popularity of country music. This was due in part to the more comprehensive way sales and airplay data began to be gathered and in part to the changing socioeconomic conditions of the time. The economic recession in the early 1990s contributed to a political and social climate that placed a great deal of emphasis on the role blue-collar workers and the middle class would play in resurrecting the greatness of America. Country music was well suited to these themes, and many artists once again downplayed the connection to rural America in order to appeal to a middle-class, suburban population. Songs like Alabama's album *40-Hour Week* praised the American worker—from coal miners, steel workers, and farmers to police officers, sales clerks, and waitresses—as the backbone of the nation. As a result of these changes, country music sales more than doubled between 1990 and 1993.

As country became more popular with the American public, it also became more popular within diverse segments of the recording industry. Producers and musicians from other genres began to blend country songs with elements of other styles, such as the accordion and rhythms of Cajun music, black gospel choirs, and the polished sound of mainstream pop. Female artists such as Shania Twain and Faith Hill became popular for singing lighthearted, pop-oriented love songs that routinely appeared on both country and pop charts as the two styles became increasingly indistinguishable.

A countermovement to this "new country" emerged in the 1990s to steer the music back toward its roots. Alternative country, or "alt.country," merges elements of traditional country and folk music with the country rock of the 1960s and the distorted electric guitars and lo-fi sound of punk. As with its counterpart genre alternative rock, the genre label was initially used to delineate artists who were operating outside the mainstream conventions of the parent genre, but quickly became meaningless as more and more artists were incorporated under the label, including bluegrass groups like Hayseed Dixie and singer-songwriter duos like the Civil Wars. Many alternative country acts created cult heroes out of some of the older stars who had been rejected by the mainstream, like Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn. Some descendants of the early stars also made careers in this style, including Hank Williams III (grandson of Hank Williams and son of Hank Williams, Jr.) and his half sister Holly Williams.

Country music returned to a more traditional sound in the early 2000s. Artists like Brad Paisley and the Dixie Chicks restored some of the traditional country sound, including fiddles, banjos, and twangy singing voices. The success of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which was set in rural Mississippi in the 1920s, aided the popularity of the traditional country sound. The soundtrack, which featured bluegrass, traditional folk songs, and covers of songs by country pioneers like Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, won the Grammy Award for Album of the Year. CMT debuted its *Crossroads* series in 2002, which paired a country artist and a pop/rock artist for performances. Pop and rock artists like Kid

Rock and Darius Rucker (of Hootie and the Blowfish) have also released country albums.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, country music found itself in the mainstream of American consciousness. Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" debuted at the CMA Awards on November 7, 2001, and the next day radio stations across America, both country and "Top 40," were playing the song. Within six weeks, it climbed to the number one song on the *Billboard* country singles chart. The song also peaked as high as 28 on the pop chart. In May 2002, Toby Keith matched Jackson's hit with "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)," which also reached the top of the country chart and number 25 on the pop chart. In contrast to Jackson's reflective tone, "Courtesy" was confrontational and, as the title states, angry, which led to several controversial episodes, including a public feud with the lead singer of the Dixie Chicks, Natalie Maines.

By 2010, country music had again become more pop- and rock-oriented. Oklahoma native Carrie Underwood won the fourth season of the pop-music talent competition *American Idol* and was an immediate crossover success.

See Also: Cultural Heritage; Cultural Identity; Everyday Uses of Music; Fans; Folk Music; Music Culture; Music Festivals; Popular Music; Whistled Speech

Further Readings

- Guralnick, P. *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians*. Back Bay Books Boston, 1999.
- Malone, B. C. *Country Music USA*. University of Texas Press Austin, 2010.
- Malone, B. C.; D. Stricklin. *Southern Music/American Music*. University Press of Kentucky Lexington, 2003.
- Rosenberg, N.I.V. *Bluegrass: A History*. University of Illinois Press Urbana, 2005.
- Tichi, C. *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music*. University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, 1994.

Eric S. Strother
University of Kentucky

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Strother, E. S. (2014). Country music. In B. Thompson, *Music in the Social and behavioral sciences: An encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/country>

APA

Strother, E. S. (2014). Country music. In B. Thompson, *Music in the Social and behavioral sciences: An encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/country>

Chicago

Strother, Eric S. "Country Music." In *Music in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Encyclopedia*, by Bill Thompson. Sage Publications, 2014. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/country>

Harvard

Strother, E.S. (2014). Country music. In B. Thompson, *Music in the Social and behavioral sciences: An encyclopedia*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/country> [Accessed 17 October 2019].

MLA

Strother, Eric S. "Country Music." *Music in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Encyclopedia*, Bill Thompson, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2014. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/country>. Accessed 17 Oct. 2019.