

Mountaineers, were fixtures on the radio barn dances but rarely made records of hit proportions. Roy Hall and the Blue Ridge Entertainers had a few moderately successful records, such as "Don't Let Your Sweet Love Die," but were best known in Virginia and the Carolinas through their radio shows. Before Hall's death in an automobile accident in 1943, few groups surpassed them in popularity in the Upper South. The duet tradition ebbed significantly during the war. Martha and James Carson, however—a husband-and-wife team from Kentucky—performed regularly on the *WSB Barn Dance* in Atlanta; Bill and Joe Callahan from North Carolina had settled down in Dallas, where they performed daily on KRLD; and Wiley and Zeke Morris, another North Carolina duo, amassed a large following through their mandolin-and-guitar-backed renditions of such songs as "Salty Dog Blues." Another stellar duet from the thirties, the Monroe brothers, had gone their separate ways well before the war started, but each had organized bands that achieved prominence during the forties. Charlie Monroe's Kentucky Partners were one of the most popular North Carolina hillbilly bands, and although they stayed close to the older string band format, several musicians who later became identified with the bluegrass style—Lester Flatt, Red Rector, and Curly Sechler—got their start with the group. Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys had been a leading act on the *Grand Ole Opry* since 1939, but their collective talents had been subsumed by the sky-high tenor voice of their leader, heard to great advantage on such songs as "Muleskinner Blues" and "Footprints in the Snow." With the addition of guitarist Lester Flatt and banjoist Earl Scruggs in 1944 and 1945 respectively—musicians who could command attention equal to that accorded Monroe—the Blue Grass Boys began making the crucial transition from old-time string band music to bluegrass.

Many musicians achieved recognition during the turbulent war years, but none so dominated and symbolized country music as did that mountain boy from East Tennessee, Roy Acuff. With his showmanship and relaxed stage presence, an utterly sincere and believable vocal style, and skill at choosing appropriate songs, Acuff won an immense audience that is all the more remarkable in that it came at a time of growing "western" dominance in country music. Neither Acuff's singing nor his instrumental accompaniment echoed any of the honky-tonk or "hot dance" traits of the Southwest.

Roy Claxton Acuff was born September 15, 1903, in Maynardville, Tennessee, the son of Neill Acuff, a Missionary Baptist minister and lawyer. A country preacher's income proved insufficient to support the family, so Roy spent his early life in a succession of homes in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains while his father sought additional means of livelihood. When Roy was sixteen, the family moved to a Knoxville suburb, Fountain City. During his attendance at Central High School in Knoxville, Acuff became a star athlete and won a total of thirteen athletic letters. His dream of a

professional baseball career did not materialize, even though the New York Yankees invited him to a summer training camp. An almost fatal sunstroke in July 1929 (during a Florida fishing trip), ended his hopes for athletic stardom and, in the long period of recuperation which followed, his interests turned toward music.

Acuff had always shown an aptitude for music and probably received his greatest inspiration from his father, who played the fiddle in the wee hours of the morning before doing the chores. A recurrence of his illness kept Acuff in Knoxville for two years, a period in which he practiced both the fiddle and his singing style. His boyhood experience of singing in Missionary Baptist church services did much to shape the lusty and emotional vocal style for which he became famous, but he also learned from a sister who had taken voice lessons and from the hillbilly records (Fiddlin' John, Gid Tanner, the Carter Family, etc.) to which he often listened. Acuff ventured into the world of show business in the spring of 1932 when he joined Doc Hauer's medicine show which toured eastern Tennessee hawking Moc-A-Tan Compound. Performing in blackface, or playing the part of "Toby," the red-haired rube character well known to traveling rural entertainment, Acuff developed the ease and showmanship that have remained with him throughout his career.

In 1933 Acuff began performing with a group of friends at dances and private parties, but soon obtained a spot on WROL in Knoxville. Calling themselves the Tennessee Crackerjacks, the boys had moved by 1934 to rival station WNOX, where they were among the earliest performers on Lowell Blanchard's *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round*, a show which became a Knoxville institution and a forum for the music of such entertainers as Chet Atkins, Bill Carlisle, Pee Wee King, and Kitty Wells. In 1935 Roy and the Crackerjacks returned to WROL to inaugurate a rival noontime show. Renamed the Crazy Tennesseans by an announcer who was impressed by their rather casual approach to formal radio entertaining, they remained on the station until Roy joined the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1938.

Acuff began his recording career in 1936, when William R. Calaway of the American Record Corporation heard him singing "The Great Speckled Bird" (the original record labels, however, spelled it "Speckle," and to many people it will always bear that title). Set to a melody reminiscent of "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," the song came to Acuff through the performances of another Knoxville radio group, Charlie Swain and the Black Shirts. The authorship of this famous song will probably always remain unknown, although it has been attributed to a Rev. Gant and to Rev. Guy Smith (Acuff also wrote four additional verses which became "The Great Speckled Bird No. 2.") The song, which pictures the church as a group of persecuted individuals who ultimately will gain eternal salvation as a reward for their earthly travail, is based upon the ninth verse of the twelfth chapter of Jeremiah: "Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird,

the birds round about are against her." The song was popular not only as a recording hit but as a favorite in some of the Pentecostal Holiness churches as well. Vance Randolph, for example, heard it sung in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, as an official Assembly of God hymn, and W. J. Cash claimed that it was "the official hymn of the Church of God."¹

After repeated tries, Acuff moved to the *Grand Ole Opry* on February 19, 1938, largely through the influence of J. L. Frank, who urged the show to take the gamble, and as a possible replacement for fiddler Arthur Smith, who had left the show. Acuff's fiddle debut tunes did not particularly impress either the audience or the *Opry* staff, but his heartfelt performance of "The Great Speckled Bird," done as his third number, elicited a large response of cards and letters. The move to the *Opry* eventually made Acuff one of the most well-known country performers in the nation, and the *Opry* the most famous radio barn dance in the United States. Accompanied by his string band, now called the Smoky Mountain Boys, he became the first real singing star of the *Grand Ole Opry*. When NBC began its thirty-minute coverage in 1939, no one but Acuff seems to have been considered for the host position. In the years that followed, "Roy Acuff" and "*Grand Ole Opry*" became almost synonymous.

As the leading star of the *Opry*, Roy Acuff performed a repertory heavily weighted with sacred and traditional-style songs, all rendered in an emotionally earnest and plaintive manner. Like all great country singers, Acuff felt strongly the sentiments he expressed and was able to communicate his feelings to his listeners. On some of his most serious numbers he became so emotionally involved with the lyrics that he wept openly. His intense delivery and graceful stage presence made him a crowd-pleaser and a great drawing card.

Oddly enough, two songs from his first recording session have always remained most strongly identified with him: "The Great Speckled Bird" and "The Wabash Cannon Ball." "The Wabash Cannon Ball" is usually attributed to A. P. Carter, but it is actually of traditional derivation, telling of a mythical train that would carry the hobo to the land of fantasy. Acuff's version seems more inspired by a 1929 recording made by fellow East Tennessean, Hugh Cross, than by that of the Carter Family. Ironically, Acuff did not sing on the first recording of the song—harmonica player Dynamite Hatcher did—but Roy supplied an imitation train whistle (inspired by his days as a callboy for the L&N Railroad) which contributed to the song's great success. He did not record the song with his own vocal until 1947. But in the meantime he had been singing it constantly on the *Opry*

1. Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, vol. 4 (Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1950), p. 59; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 297.

and on his many road shows. He is still singing it and "The Great Speckled Bird" in the 1980's.

Acuff resisted electrical amplification long after it had become the norm in most country bands and instead adhered to the style and format of the older acoustic string bands. Lacking confidence in his ability to play the fiddle (which he actually played rather well), he left the bulk of the instrumentation to other band members. Acuff always employed outstanding fiddlers, such as Tommy Magness and Howard "Howdy" Forrester, but the center of his instrumentation, and a defining feature of the Roy Acuff sound, was the dobro steel guitar. On his earliest recordings the instrument was played by James Clell Summey, who later became a popular baggy-pants comedian known for his toothless grin, Cousin Jody. After 1938 Acuff's dobro player was Beecher Kirby (best known as "Bashful Brother Oswald"), who sang one of the highest and most easily recognized harmonies in country music, frailed the five-string banjo, and did comedy routines, often with Rachel Veach, who was advertised as his sister. Kirby, who is still with the Acuff organization as of 1984, made the unelectrified dobro the most prominent feature of the Smoky Mountain Boys' instrumentation at the very time when electric instruments were becoming the rage in other country music groups.

Instrumentation was only one aspect of Acuff's effort to keep his music as traditional as possible. His singing style and choice of songs suggested the mountain country churches. When his entire group joined him on gospel numbers, no attempt was made to achieve close harmony, for Acuff wanted to keep the style similar to that heard in his boyhood church. The Smoky Mountain Boys were unaffected by the western image. Acuff wore sport clothes during his stage appearances, while his band members dressed in overalls or other casual attire. Acuff's repertory was largely of his own choosing, but it also reflected (at least during the Columbia years) the inclinations of his artists and repertory (A&R) man, Arthur Satherley. The British-born Satherley, who came to the United States as a young man filled with visions of cowboys and romantic isolated mountaineers, tried to keep country music moored to its traditional roots, and he found Acuff to be much more committed to old-time songs than his other two famous "discoveries," Bob Wills and Gene Autry. There is not a single "cowboy" or western-style song in Roy Acuff's repertory, and very little that suggests a western swing influence. Acuff's song catalogue is heavily weighted with sacred numbers like "The Great Judgment Morning," sentimental songs of unrequited love like "Come Back Little Pal" (learned from Roy Hall) and "All the World Is Lonely Now," old-time novelty numbers like "Ida Red," and tragic numbers such as "Unloved and Unclaimed" (about the suicide drowning of an anonymous woman in Nashville).

Acuff seems to have written some of his most popular songs, such as

"The Precious Jewel"—a song about the death of a young prospective bride set to the melody of a mournful mountain ballad, "The Hills of Roane County." But most of his repertory came from other composers. Some of them, like Fred Rose, were very well known. Much of his material, though, came from obscure or anonymous writers. Jim Anglin, for example—a one-time member of the Anglin Brothers singing team in the late thirties—wrote many of Acuff's finest songs: "Lonely Mound of Clay," "Branded Wherever I Go," "Stuck Up Blues," "They Can Only Fill One Grave," "As Long As I Live," "Just a Friend," and "Unloved and Unclaimed."

Acuff gained success as a "mountain" singer when the majority of country performers seemed to be discarding traditional rural numbers and accepting "western" styles and techniques. His great success came partly because he presented a musical alternative to the country music fans who were being deluged with the newer musical styles and partly (and this probably helps to explain country music's overall popularity) because the war "caused people to turn to simpler and more fundamental things."² When Roy Acuff raised his voice in his mournful, mountain style, he seemed to suggest all the verities for which Americans were fighting: home, mother, and God.

Regardless of the source of his appeal, Americans packed any place in which Roy Acuff appeared, whether it was Nashville's Ryman Auditorium for the Saturday night *Grand Ole Opry*, or the site of one of his numerous touring appearances. A capacity crowd at Constitution Hall in Washington paid as much as \$6.60 each to see him; at Cincinnati's Music Hall a country music show starring Acuff and Ernest Tubb attracted 13,000 people for two performances; and at Venice Pier, California, Acuff drew the largest crowd that had ever gone to a Foreman Phillips promotion. The 11,130 paid admissions gave rise to fears that the pier would fall from the weight.

Acuff's income, which over the years has been among the highest in the country music business, was estimated at well over \$200,000 in 1942. Largely through the business acumen of his wife, Mildred, Acuff built an immense personal fortune through adroit financial dealings, through his co-ownership of Dunbar Cave Resort near Clarksville, Tennessee (after 1947), and through his co-ownership of Hickory Records.

His popularity was not confined to American audiences. A two-week popularity contest held on the Armed Forces Network's *Munich Morning Report* gave Acuff, out of 3,700 votes cast, a lead of 600 votes over popular crooner Frank Sinatra. As a result, the AFN instituted a new show, *Hill-billy Jamboree*, directed from Munich at American occupation forces in Europe.

2. This quote has been attributed to popular songwriter Frank Loesser: *Billboard* 55, no. 43 (October 23, 1943): 66.

An incident that reveals the world-wide significance of Roy Acuff's name, and is probably the greatest tribute he ever received, occurred on the remote island of Okinawa. Upon attacking a Marine position, a Japanese banzai charge used a battle cry which it thought would be the ultimate in insults: "To hell with Roosevelt; to hell with Babe Ruth; to hell with Roy Acuff!"

An important figure in Acuff's career, and one of the major forces behind country music's commercial evolution, was Fred Rose, who grew up outside the country music world and spent his early career as a popular music entertainer. Despite his "nonrustic" origins, he became one of the most successful country songwriters of all time, and a major discoverer and promoter of young country talent. He was one of the first three individuals elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Rose was born in Evansville, Indiana, on August 24, 1897, but grew up in St. Louis. Before the forties, he had little association with country music, but had pursued a career as a pianist and popular songwriter in Chicago. Elected to ASCAP in 1938, Rose had gained considerable success as the writer of such songs as Sophie Tucker's "Red Hot Mama," "Deed I Do," and "Honest and Truly."

His first venture into the writing of country-style songs came on the West Coast in 1940, when he wrote sixteen songs for Gene Autry, including the very popular "Be Honest with Me." In the next decade Rose wrote hundreds of songs that were recorded or otherwise performed by most country performers. When Rose moved to Nashville and became the staff pianist for Station WSM, he became acquainted with Roy Acuff—an association that proved mutually profitable and beneficial. Rose commented that he never truly understood the real meaning of country music until he stood backstage one night at the *Grand Ole Opry* and watched Acuff, with tears streaming from his eyes, sing a song about a dying child, "Don't Make Me Go to Bed, and I'll Be Good."³ Writing often under assumed names, such as Floyd Jenkins and Bart Dawson, Rose composed many of the most popular and enduring songs of the forties and fifties. Like Cindy Walker and Boudleaux and Felice Bryant, Rose could easily adapt to any style of country music, from gospel to secular. Songs like "Be Honest with Me," "Pins and Needles (in My Heart)," and "No One Will Ever Know" are known by all country fans. His biggest hit came posthumously: "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," though recorded by earlier singers, was a massive success for Willie Nelson in 1975.

In 1942 Rose and Roy Acuff organized the first exclusive country music publishing house in the United States, Acuff-Rose Publications. This firm provided the nucleus for Nashville's later rise to eminence in the music industry and brought further financial success to each of its founders. In December 1945 Fred Rose turned the operation of the business over to his

3. Interview with Wesley Rose, Nashville, August 28, 1961.

son Wesley and began devoting most of his time to the aid and encouragement of prospective young songwriters, the most famous being Hank Williams.

Country songwriters explored a variety of themes during the forties, but nothing attracted their attention more than the war itself. Continuing a tradition set by their ballad-making ancestors centuries earlier, the country singers and writers chronicled the war as they talked of the experiences, sufferings, and death of the departed soldiers, and of the anxieties and sadness of their loved ones. Patriotic songs and related war songs were among the most popular numbers in the hillbilly repertory from 1941 to 1946. Carson Robison's "1942 Turkey in the Straw" was, according to *Billboard*, the most popular hillbilly song during the first year of the war. No song, however, surpassed in popularity Elton Britt's version of "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere." Written by the prolific songwriter Bob Miller, the song was first released in May 1942 as the "B" side of a Bluebird record. Recounting the story of a crippled mountain boy who yearned to do his part in the war effort, the record gained astounding success because it attracted not only hillbilly enthusiasts but popular music fans as well. Britt's recorded version sold over a million and a half copies, while almost as many copies of sheet music were sold. Remaining popular well into 1943, the song was eventually recorded by many acts, popular and hillbilly. In his recorded version, however, Elton Britt, billed as "the highest yodeler in the world," became the first hillbilly singer since Vernon Dalhart to record a song of national hit proportions which transcended the bounds of most musical categories.

Some of the songs, like Roy Acuff's "Cowards over Pearl Harbor," expressed Americans' shock and anger at their sudden and undesired entry into the war. "Smoke on the Water," recorded by its writer, Zeke Clements, and also by such singers as Red Foley, breathed a defiant tone as it described what would happen "when our army and navy overtake the enemy." Few songs responded to the war as naively as did "I'll Be Back in a Year Little Darling," but several expressed similar promises of faithfulness: "Each Night at Nine," "We'll Meet Again, Sweetheart," "I'll Be True While You're Gone," "When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again," "I'll Wait for You," "Silver Dew on the Blue Grass Tonight," "Mother, I Thank You for the Bible You Gave." Some songs, of course—such as "Are You Waiting Just for Me," "At Mail Call Today" (about a "Dear John" letter), and "Have I Stayed Away Too Long" (written by pop composer Frank Loesser, who admitted a liking for hillbilly music)—discussed unfaithful love or the anxieties felt by servicemen about their loved ones back home.

The most poignant wartime songs dealt with the tragedy of war. Tex Ritter's "Gold Star in the Window" told of "the price a mother paid to keep us free." Songs like "Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima" and "White Cross on Okinawa," both recorded by Bob Wills, told of American sacrifices for the

cause of freedom. "The Soldier's Last Letter," written by Ernest Tubb and Sergeant Henry "Redd" Stewart (Pee Wee King's long-time vocalist and partner), told of a mother's sorrow upon receiving word that her son had been killed in action. Red River Dave McEnery's "The Blind Boy's Dog" was more ludicrous than pathetic, and it probably provoked more laughs than its composer intended, but it no doubt touched a few hearts with its tale of a blind boy who patriotically sent his lead dog off to die in the war. The two most affecting songs about war's tragedies were "Teardrops Falling in the Snow" (written by Mac McCarty and beautifully sung by Molly O'Day) and "Searching for a Soldier's Grave" (written by Jim Anglin and recorded by the Bailes Brothers). "Teardrops Falling in the Snow" tells of a mother's trip to a the railroad station to receive the casket "wrapped in red, white, and blue" that bears her son. "Searching for a Soldier's Grave" tells of a person who travels abroad to find the final resting place of a loved one, and it universalizes the individual tragedies produced by the war when it remarks that beneath the white crosses lie buried the hearts of thousands of Americans back home across the ocean.

Apart from the patriotic songs, wartime country music continued to mine the same veins that had attracted earlier writers. Except for the songs composed for motion pictures, however, "cowboy" melodies declined significantly as a part of the hillbilly repertory. The western myth nevertheless remained in the wearing of gaudy cowboy paraphernalia. The honky-tonk had definitely come to exert a powerful and dominating role in country music. Among songs of the honky-tonk variety, those of Texas origin generally predominated: Ernest Tubb's "Walking the Floor Over You," Ted Daffan's "Worried Mind," "Headin' Down the Wrong Highway," and "Born to Lose," Jerry Irby's "Driving Nails in My Coffin," and Floyd Tillman's "They Took the Stars Out of Heaven" and "It Makes No Difference Now." The composers of "The Last Letter" and "When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again" were not born in the Lone Star State, but they were strongly identified with Texas because of long residence there, and their songs competed for the nickels of beer hall patrons all over the state. Neither Rex Griffin ("The Last Letter") nor Gene Sullivan ("When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again") were honky-tonk musicians; they were instead radio performers who merely happened to write and record songs that made their way into honky-tonks all over the country. Griffin was a Gadsden, Alabama, native who wandered into radio stations all over the South before winding up in Dallas in the early forties. His great song of forsaken love, "The Last Letter," has traveled much farther than its creator; it has entered the repertory of almost every country singer. Gene Sullivan and his long-time singing partner Wiley Walker were Alabama boys, too, who traveled separate routes as entertainers before organizing their duet in Texas in 1939. Walker was a fiddler and singer who traveled with Lew Childre for several years and who had been a dancer, singer, musi-

cian, and actor with Harley Sadler's West Texas tent show in the late thirties. Sullivan belonged to several bands, including those headed by Happy Hal Burns in Birmingham, the Shelton Brothers in Shreveport, and Roy Newman in Dallas, before finally teaming up with Walker in Dallas. They made radio transcriptions, performed in Fort Worth and Lubbock, and then moved to Oklahoma City, where they became ensconced on local radio (WKY) for many years. They had settled down in Oklahoma City when their two most famous songs, "When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again" and "Live and Let Live," appeared as opposite sides of the same Okeh record. The melancholy lyrics, combined with Walker's and Sullivan's gentle, low-pitched harmony, made the songs extremely popular with country fans everywhere. They captured the mood of loneliness and separation that so many people felt during the war years, and they have never since lost their appeal to people.

Many songs demonstrated popular appeal in the early forties, but few were as commercially successful as "Pistol Packin' Mama." Although it was released by Okeh in March 1943, the song was inspired by the violence and turbulence of East Texas oilfield days. Its performer and writer, Al Dexter (Albert Poindexter, born in Jacksonville, Texas, in 1905), had been the proprietor of a honky-tonk near Longview, Texas, in about 1933. The idea for the song came to him one day when a gun-toting woman chased her husband's girlfriend (and one of Al's waitresses) through a barbed-wire fence. Some years later he attached the words to a melody borrowed from Bob Wills' "Take Me Back to Tulsa," and ultimately saw his song become one of the smash hits of American country and popular music. The rollicking novelty tune, which offended some people because of its open reference to drinking beer, succeeded "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere" as the country's most popular hillbilly song and reached even greater commercial heights when that remarkable urban bucolic, Bing Crosby, and the Andrews Sisters performed it as their first post-strike recording in September 1943. Within six months of its issuance, over a million copies of the record had been sold; the song itself ranks as one of the two or three most popular hits of the war years. The song, however, did not appear on CBS' *Lucky Strike Hit Parade*, then the chief means of denoting America's most popular melodies, until October 1943. The reasons it was rejected earlier were unknown, but *Life* magazine suspected that it might be because of the sponsor's dislike or because Frank Sinatra, the show's star vocalist, could not sing the little ditty.⁴ The song sold more than three million records in less than two years, and Dexter was still receiving royalties on it up into the 1960's.

Country music came out of the war years, therefore, exhibiting a strength that was remarkable given the context of scarcity and restrictiveness in

4. *Life* 15, no. 11 (October 11, 1943): 55.

which it operated. The process of nationalization that had begun in the thirties accelerated during the war when servicemen and women and migrating civilians introduced their musical tastes to new people in distant climes. The names of such entertainers as Jimmie Davis, Ernest Tubb, Gene Autry, Ted Daffan, Bob Wills, and Roy Acuff had become known, in varying degrees, all over the United States. Throughout the late thirties and the war years, songs had occasionally transcended the bounds of country music to become national favorites. The music industry as a whole certainly took note of country music's great gains during the early forties. *Billboard* noted prophetically that the music had "shown by its work against adverse conditions that when the war is over and normalcy returns it will be the field to watch."⁵

5. *Billboard* 55, no. 9 (February 27, 1943): 94.

7. The Boom Period: The Emergence of a Big Business, 1946–1953

The uncertain peace that followed World War II ushered in a period of unparalleled prosperity. Freed from wartime restraints, anxious Americans now sought the stability and material abundance that had been denied them in earlier eras. The pursuit of pleasure and amusement proceeded apace, and country music profited as a result. In many respects the dawning period was to be the real “golden age” of country music. Later decades would bring greater material rewards to country musicians, but no period would experience a happier fusion of “traditional” sounds and commercial burgeoning than did the immediate postwar era.

As the nation converted successfully to a civilian, domestic economy, the music industry, unhampered by wartime restrictions, geared itself for a highly prosperous period. Records could now be produced in quantities above their prewar levels, and an entertainment-hungry public was ready to buy them. Country music, which had prospered despite (or perhaps because of) defense regulations, was already giving signs of increased national recognition. Songs like “Oklahoma Hills,” performed by Jack Guthrie (soon to die in a veteran’s hospital), Spade Cooley’s “Shame on You,” Wesley Tuttle’s “Detour,” Arthur Smith’s “Guitar Boogie,” and Merle Travis’ “Divorce Me C.O.D.” were jukebox favorites all over the nation in 1946. Bing Crosby, moreover, crossed once more into the country field and recorded the biggest song of all, “Sioux City Sue” (done the previous year by Dick Thomas).

At the conclusion of the war at least sixty-five recording companies, fifteen of them on the West Coast, were releasing country records. Radio continued to be an indispensable means of exploiting hillbilly talent. By 1949 at least 650 radio stations used live country performers. In the early commercial years most of the hillbilly shows had been broadcast at noon or

during the early morning hours, since program directors felt that only early-rising farmers listened to the programs. But with their newly discovered popularity, country entertainers were scheduled at more advantageous hours and were produced with the same care given to other musical offerings. In addition to established shows like the *Grand Ole Opry*, the period saw the emergence of regional barn dances like Atlanta's *WSB Barn Dance*, Bristol, Virginia's *Farm and Fun Time* (heard each day at noon over a five-state area), Dallas' *Big D Jamboree*, Los Angeles' *Town Hall Party* and *Dinner Bell Roundup* (later called the *Hometown Jamboree*), and, most important of all, Shreveport's *Louisiana Hayride*. In addition to providing local entertainment, these shows started many successful country musicians on the road to wider fame.

Country music, therefore, was in the midst of a burgeoning commercial success that was most evidenced, perhaps, by the growth and development of the personal-appearance field. *Billboard* claimed that country performers were major box-office attractions almost anywhere in the United States, even in "sedate New England."¹ The South, as usual, was a lucrative area for hillbilly entertainers, but Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan were recognized as important markets for country music. Country music even ventured into historic Carnegie Hall in October 1947, when a *Grand Old Opry* unit headed by Ernest Tubb played two nights for a gross of over \$9,000.

The most vigorous region for live country performances may very well have been California, where major emphasis was devoted to ballroom performances and the big radio barn dances which began in the mid-forties. When Bob Wills relocated in California in September 1943, the dance hall business had already begun to thrive, but he soon became a major musical force in the state, breaking attendance records everywhere he went, operating a club in Sacramento called Wills Point, and occasionally making cross-country tours. His Texas Playboys had moved away from their earlier emphasis on horns and had once again become basically a fiddle band. Wills himself was devoting more attention to fiddle hoedowns, and he acquired two new fiddlers, Johnny Gimble (from Texas) and Keith Coleman (from Oklahoma), who were at home in any style. Wills had also added another twist to his band by adding a female vocalist, Laura Lee McBride, the first featured woman singer in the western swing genre. McBride was well-connected in the country field; she was the daughter of radio cowboy singer Tex Owens, the niece of Texas Ruby Owens, and the wife of band-leader Dickie McBride.

The era of country ballrooms had begun in 1942 when Foreman Phillips opened the Venice Pier Ballroom, catering to transplanted Okies, defense workers, and servicemen. Before his retirement in 1952, Phillips had

1. *Billboard* 59, no. 52 (December 27, 1947): 18.

opened three other thriving ballrooms in Culver City, Baldwin Park, and Compton, and had begun to hire such musicians as Ray Whitley, Hank Penny, Ted Daffan, Curley Williams, T. Texas Tyler, and Red Murrell to head his house bands. Phillips also was instrumental in the creation of the band that did most to give western swing its name, Spade Cooley and His Orchestra.

Donnell Clyde "Spade" Cooley's story is one of success and tragedy. Cooley came to Modesto, California, with his family from Grande, Oklahoma, in the 1930's and soon became a fiddler with various bands in the area around Los Angeles. Foreman Phillips hired him away from the Jimmy Wakely Trio in about 1942 to head a band at Venice Pier. He was joined late that same year by a singer and bass player from Illinois, Sollie Paul "Tex" Williams, who was to have a profitable relationship with Cooley until 1946. In 1943 Cooley took his band to the Riverside Rancho Ballroom, where they played nightly to overflow crowds until 1946. During these busy and prosperous years, and at the Santa Monica Ballroom after 1946, Cooley became known as the "King of Western Swing," apparently the first use of the term to describe the music which Bob Wills and Milton Brown had pioneered. Cooley's music was more heavily orchestrated than that of Wills (whose musicians generally improvised what they felt), but his large band included some remarkably innovative musicians, such as jazz-style steel guitarist Joaquin Murphy, and an instrument or two, such as a harp, that almost never appeared in other country bands. Cooley maintained his popularity until one sad night in 1961 when, in a fit of drunken rage, he beat and stomped his wife to death. Tragedy remained with Cooley for the last few short years of his life. He was in prison for eight years and died of a heart attack in 1969 while on a temporary parole to attend a concert in his honor.

Cooley's former vocalist, Tex Williams, formed his own band, the Western Caravan, in 1946 and went on to become one of the most-admired singers of the period. His smooth, ultra-deep voice was first heard on "Shame on You," a big Columbia hit for Spade Cooley in 1945-1946, but Williams had a successful string of recordings on his own for the Capitol label after 1946. One of them not only was financially satisfying to Williams but also was well ahead of its time in the message it conveyed. This was his 1947 hit, "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke!" a half-sung, half-recited complaint about the inconveniences caused by chronic smokers.

"Smoke! Smoke! Smoke!" was the brainchild of Merle Travis, one of country music's most brilliant and multi-talented entertainers. When Travis left the Marines and moved to California in 1944, he became part of a rather large migration of musicians, such as Speedy West, Ted Daffan, Adolph Hofner, Hank Thompson, and Lefty Frizzell, who wandered to the West Coast in the late forties and early fifties. Travis had already made a name for himself back east, and had made a few records with his old

friend Grandpa Jones. He had developed his much-admired guitar style by building on tips picked up from such guitarists as Kennedy Jones and Mose Rager in his home county of Muhlenberg in the coal-mining district of western Kentucky. Guitarists everywhere now describe the style as "Travis picking," but Merle himself calls it "thumb style" (the use of the thumb to maintain a bass rhythm while the forefinger plays a syncopated melody on the treble strings). When Chet Atkins was growing up in East Tennessee, he heard Travis on the radio and was later amazed to discover that so much music could be made with only two fingers.

In California, Travis was quickly swept into a busy whirl of music as both a soloist and a sideman. He made records of his own for Capitol after 1946, and some of them—such as "Divorce Me C.O.D." and "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed"—are excellent examples of the West Coast honky-tonk sound. He appeared on hundreds of recordings as a supporting musician for other acts; he performed on the *Town Hall Party* and *Dinner Bell Roundup*; he kept friends and audiences amused with his wit and storehouse of tales; he drew cartoons and wrote stories; and he wrote some of country music's greatest songs. Travis generally wrote rather happy-go-lucky songs, such as "So Round, So Firm," and "Sweet Temptation," but he also demonstrated a flair for writing religious numbers and songs of social commentary. When asked in 1947 to record some folksongs from "back home," he responded by writing some of his own. They included the now well-known religious piece "I Am a Pilgrim" and two famous documents of coal-mining life, "Dark as a Dungeon" and "Sixteen Tons."

Country musicians who flocked to California also found outlets for their talents on the local radio stations, and particularly on the barn dances which flourished after the mid-forties. Along with Foreman Phillips, Cliffie Stone probably did more to popularize country music in the region than any other person. Stone had a daily variety show, the *Dinner Bell Roundup*, on KXLA in Pasadena. Many country entertainers appeared on the program, one of the most notable being the swing fiddler and bandleader Red Murrell, who had one of the most popular bands in California. Other important members included Herman the Hermit (Cliffie Stone's father and a popular banjo player); ace fiddler Harold Hensley; Tennessee Ernie Ford; and the Armstrong Twins (Lloyd and Floyd), a mandolin and guitar duo who brought a touch of their native Arkansas countryside to the West Coast. In 1949 the show moved to the Legion Stadium in El Monte, California, where it became known as the *Hometown Jamboree*. Another show which endured up to the sixties as a haven for country entertainers was the Saturday night *Town Hall Party* in Compton, broadcast on KFI Radio and KTTV-TV. The show featured a nucleus of established performers such as Tex Ritter, Johnny Bond, Tex Williams, Joe and Rose Maphis, Eddie Kirk, Eddie Dean, Lefty Frizzell, Skeets McDonald, Wesley Tuttle, and

Merle Travis, and it also served as a launching ground for such future stars as Freddie Hart. The young Buck Owens, for example, appeared as a sideman on the show playing his electric guitar for most of the featured acts.

California's vigorous country music scene inspired innovations that eventually affected musicians elsewhere. Country entertainers had long shown a preference for western attire, but the passion for gaudy, be-spangled, and sequined uniforms began in California when Nudie the Tailor started supplying his unique creations to local musicians. Nudie Cohen (whose complete name is seldom printed) came to the West Coast from Brooklyn shortly after World War I and, after a brief career as a boxer, began sewing costumes for Warner Brothers. Before Tex Williams hired him to make costumes for his band in the late forties, Nudie had also had some experience as a brassiere and G-string manufacturer for the strip-tease industry back in New York City. The western suits supplied to the Tex Williams organization were tasteful and restrained, but the costumes commissioned thereafter became progressively more outlandish with their bright colors, ornate decorations, and fringe. Success for country musicians became almost defined by the number of Nudie suits in their wardrobe.

California also provided a context for the flourishing and maturation of electrical amplification. A trio of manufacturers—Rickenbacker, Bigsby, and Fender—supplied electric standard guitars, steel guitars, and basses to the scores of musicians who played in the club bands in the Greater Los Angeles area and in Southern California. The specific origins of solid-body guitars, vibrators, and pedal steel instruments are unknown, but they were coming into general use by the end of the forties. Some special brands were made on demand for certain musicians; Paul Bigsby, for example, made a guitar to Merle Travis' specifications which was of solid wood body, had all the keys on one side of the headstock, and was cut deep into the body so that the fingers could move far down the neck. In the meantime, Leo Fender was supplying from his home in Anaheim a steady stream of solid body electric guitars to such musicians as Jimmy Bryant (one of the most respected of the jazz-country guitarists in California) and Arthur Smith, a country guitar wizard in Charlotte, North Carolina (not to be confused with the fiddler) whose hit recording of "Guitar Boogie" in 1947 made people see the potential of the electric standard guitar. Fender introduced his Broadcaster model in 1948, and this popular instrument, whose name was soon changed to Telecaster, became the most favored guitar among country musicians. The name Fender almost became synonymous with "electric guitar," and in the hands of such musicians as James Burton, Roy Buchanan, Buck Owens, and Roy Nichols (who was just beginning his career in the mid-forties as a teenage guitarist with the Maddox Brothers and Rose), the Fender guitar contributed crucially to the making

of the "California sound." The sharp, staccato bursts of the Fender guitar, combined with the high-pitched, strident, wailing sound of the pedal steel guitar, gave California country music a distinctive flavor. Leo Fender's bass guitar, introduced in 1951, contributed further to the thoroughgoing electrification of country music: it also freed the bass player to be a more mobile and flexible member of a band. Musicians no longer had to drag the big stand-up, acoustic bass across the stage in order to get close to the microphone to sing, and they found that they could easily transport the electric instrument and amplifier on roadshow engagements. When hillbilly bands no longer roamed across the country with the "bass fiddle" tied to the top of their touring car, an era of American music had truly come to an end.

In the postwar years country music was characterized not only by commercial success and stylistic innovation, but also by the entertainers' growing sophistication about the world of show business. Many country performers, like Gene Autry, owned radio stations. A few, like Roy Acuff, owned publishing houses, an activity that would increase tremendously in the following decades. Universally, country musicians were learning to manage their own promotional and contractual affairs or were employing skilled managers to do it for them. No longer, as was often true before 1940, was the hillbilly easy prey for the crafty promoter who ventured into an area laden with portable recording apparatus, made some quick recordings, paid a small sum, and then dashed off again. Hopeful country entertainers everywhere evidenced a growing understanding of contract stipulations. By 1946, performers were demanding from \$150 to \$200 for each record side, asking for advances against royalties, and exhibiting familiarity with copyright laws and American Federation of Musicians regulations. With the rise of BMI, hillbilly songwriters had begun to receive greater protection and profits in the performance rights of their songs. ASCAP had come to recognize the legitimacy of country music and was becoming more favorably disposed to the admission of hillbilly songwriters. Conceding that hillbilly songs had been inadequately covered in previous surveys, ASCAP in 1947 promised to improve its logging surveys of independent radio stations, where the majority of hillbilly songs were played.

As the number of professional country musicians increased, and the number of entertainment outlets with them, a new group of personal managers and bookers emerged. Until the end of the war, most country-talent promotions were handled by radio-station talent bureaus, such as those of WSM and WLS. Under this arrangement the scheduling of personal appearances was often limited to the immediate territory blanketed by the station's transmitter. After the war a number of major talent offices concerned with cross-country touring became interested in country music. Such booking agencies as Jolly Joyce in Philadelphia, Stan Zucker

in New York, American Corporation in Hollywood, and Gene Johnson in Wheeling, West Virginia, by 1949 had expanded their touring operations to the forty-eight states. In addition, such personal managers as Oscar Davis, J. L. Frank, and Colonel Tom Parker made huge sums of money through their superintendence of talent, and their ranks were gradually being joined by such native southern entrepreneurs as Hubert Long, Jim Denny, and Jim Halsey.

If some doubts had existed in previous years, there was now no question that the *Grand Ole Opry* had become "king" of barn-dance radio shows and that Nashville had become the leading country music center. The *Opry*, with its wide radio coverage on WSM augmented by the thirty-minute NBC segment, had become universally known as the "hillbilly heaven." Roy Acuff's immense popularity had transformed the *Opry* from a localized barn dance to a national program featuring "star" talent. Regardless of their commercial origins—honky-tonk or small radio show—most hillbilly performers dreamed of someday being invited to become members of the *Opry* cast. The *Opry* paid only the most minimal of fees, but membership on its roster lent prestige to an individual and indispensable aid in obtaining bookings everywhere. Most performers were willing to appear on the *Opry* for a modest fee on Saturday night and then tour with an *Opry* unit during the week in the belief that their overall income would be increased.

By the late forties many country fans had come to look upon the *Grand Ole Opry*, perhaps unfortunately, as synonymous with country music. All rabid country enthusiasts felt that before they died they must make at least one trip to the mecca of country music. As a result, every Saturday night people from all over the United States, and from Canada and other foreign countries, gathered in Nashville to view the program. Those without reserved seats gladly stood in line outside the Ryman Auditorium for hours and then sat inside for hours more to view their favorites. The schedule has since changed radically, but the *Grand Ole Opry* in the late forties was carried over WSM from 7:30 P.M. until midnight.

As the *Grand Ole Opry* grew in size and popularity, it lost both its original geographical identity (that of a Middle Tennessee barn dance) and much of its down-home ambience. George D. Hay's dream of an uncommercialized "folk" format had long before been obliterated under an avalanche of commercial advertising, and "stars" had proliferated in the show's firmament ever since Roy Acuff joined its cast. Nevertheless, "good old boys and girls" from the South still predominated overwhelmingly on its roster, and they and the *Opry* management strove mightily to preserve the sense of family and informality for which the show was famous. Friends and relatives still sat on benches at the back of the stage, and performers walked in and out while their colleagues performed before the microphones. The whole effect was one of organized confusion or controlled

chaos, and was held together largely through the patience and planning of Vito Pellettieri, the *Opry's* long-time stage manager.

By 1950 the *Grand Ole Opry* had a cast of about 120 individuals, including singers, instrumentalists, and comedians. The program was divided into fifteen- and thirty-minute segments each of which featured a leading performer supported by other acts. Millions of Americans heard the show on the lengthy WSM broadcasts, but many heard only the thirty-minute NBC segment. The NBC "Prince Albert" show was hosted for about eight years after 1946 by Clyde Julian "Red" Foley. Foley was, arguably, the most versatile singer of the 1950's, and none has surpassed him since. He came from Blue Lick, Kentucky (not far from Berea), where he was born in 1910. He went to the *National Barn Dance* in 1930 as part of John Lair's Cumberland Ridge Runners, and while in Chicago, in 1933, he married Eva Overstake, one of the Three Little Maids and a sister of Jenny Lou Carson, a talented country music songwriter. Foley was one of the Chicago show's most popular entertainers, beloved for his comedy, his duets with Lulu Belle Cooper, and his solo singing. He was a founder and charter member of the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and was a regular on that show for about three years. Foley was recognized very early as a person who was at home with any kind of song material, and he is said to have been asked on occasion to forsake country music for a career as a pop singer.

As a *Grand Ole Opry* host, Foley acted as a genial master-of-ceremonies, served as a straight man for the antics of comedians Minnie Pearl and Rod Brasfield, introduced guest acts, gave serious recitations, hawked his sponsor's products, and sang a wide variety of songs. Foley could give convincing interpretations of the most sentimental material. His version of "That Little Boy of Mine" was a much-requested song, while "Old Shep"—a song about an aged, dying dog—evoked tears from an array of listeners (including Elvis Presley, according to his own testimony). He was just as believable on boogie, blues, and jump tunes. "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy" was a giant hit for him, while "Birmingham Bounce," "Tennessee Saturday Night," "Hearts of Stone," and "Pinball Boogie" demonstrated his thorough knowledge of and liking for black-derived tunes. It is a testimony to his skill that he could so readily move from a slightly raunchy song like "Pinball Boogie" ("you rattle and you shake it 'til it gets in the hole") to his soulful versions of the spiritual/recitation "Steal Away" and such gospel songs as "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" and "Peace in the Valley." Recorded in March 1951, "Peace in the Valley" (written by the great black gospel composer Thomas A. Dorsey) became one of the first religious songs to receive wide commercial exposure.

Although Foley did much to make the *Grand Ole Opry* the most famous country radio show in the nation, the program certainly had no monopoly on country broadcasting. Throughout the United States, in small towns and cities alike, scores of shindigs, hoedowns, jamboroes, and barn dances

commanded the attention of radio listeners on Saturday nights or, as in the cases of Knoxville's *Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round* or Bristol's *Farm and Fun Time*, at lunch time. Each of the bigger shows, such as the *Wheeling* (West Virginia) *Jamboree* or Dallas' *Big D Jamboree*, had its quota of well-known stars, but few could equal Shreveport's *Louisiana Hayride* as a forum for musical exposure, nor as a launching ground for future stardom. The *Hayride* appears to have been the joint creation of three men associated with powerful KWKH: station manager Henry Clay, announcer and program director Horace Logan, and commercial manager Dean Upson, who had once been a member of the smooth-singing trio, the Vagabonds. The show which played for three hours on Saturday night, April 3, 1948, built on an earlier tradition of country music on KWKH dating back to the early thirties which had included at least a couple of variety shows—a Sunday afternoon talent show conducted by the Shelton Brothers in 1936 and a *Saturday Night Roundup* featuring the Rice Brothers Gang and other groups after 1940. The April 3 show included some musicians who had been present at the station for several years (such as West Virginian Harmie Smith and western swing bandleader Pappy Covington), but it also featured some acts, such as the Bailes Brothers (Walter, Johnnie, and Kyle) and Johnny and Jack (along with Johnny's then-unknown wife, Kitty Wells), who had come to Shreveport only a few months previously. Broadcasting each Saturday from the Memorial Auditorium, the show found a large and receptive audience in the three-state area (Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas) contiguous to Shreveport which, according to *Hayride* historian Stephen Ray Tucker, "was experiencing an economic upsurge that was tied to the area's expanding oil and gas industry."² Fifty-thousand-watt KWKH, of course, was heard over a much broader swath of territory, but *Hayride* performers typically gave concerts during the week in towns whose proximity would permit them to get back to Shreveport on Saturday night.

On August 7, 1948, only four months after the show got underway, Hank Williams joined its cast and soon became its, and country music's, dominant star. Largely on the strength of his sensational recording of "Lovesick Blues," Williams moved to the *Grand Ole Opry* in November 1949, a pattern that would be repeated by many performers in the following ten or eleven years. Despite the *Hayride's* considerable popularity, it never really threatened the *Grand Old Opry's* leadership because as soon as *Hayride* performers gained wider exposure (usually with a hit record or two) they left to join the Nashville barn dance. This happened with such frequency—as in the cases of Webb Pierce, Faron Young, Johnny Cash, George Jones, Johnny and Jack, the Wilburn Brothers, and Jim Reeves—

2. Stephen Ray Tucker, "The Louisiana Hayride, 1948–1954," *North Louisiana Historical Association Journal* 8, no. 5 (Fall 1977): 188.

that the *Hayride* gained the sobriquet of "the Cradle of the Stars." The *Hayride*'s most famous member, Elvis Presley, who joined in 1954, brought a new audience to the show, but when he left for bigger and better things, much of that audience went with him. The *Hayride* endured into the 1960's, but its glory days had come earlier, in the years from 1948 to 1955.

Even though live radio performances preserved their potency up into the fifties, the trend toward the playing of phonograph recordings proved irresistible. Disc jockeys proliferated during the fifties, and many of them proved to be as popular as the musicians whose records they played (many of them, of course, were musicians). They were men and women with distinctive voices, engaging personalities, and high-powered but homey patter that appealed to country music's working-class audience. Country music had not yet become so concerned with respectability, nor so removed from its rural roots, that it was embarrassed by the hayseed imagery and parlance which some DJ's conveyed. And country music had not yet become so prosperous that it attracted people into its midst who had little knowledge of its traditions. Consequently, most of the disc jockeys were people who had a genuine love for the music they played and who had grown up with it or had tried to make a living from it. A few of the announcers, such as Lee Moore at WWVA, Nelson King at WCKY (Cincinnati), Randy Blake at WJJD (Chicago), Rosalie Allen at WOV (New York), Eddie Hill at WSM, Hugh Cherry at WKDA (Nashville), Biff Collie at KLEE (Houston), and Squeakin' Deacon Moore at KXLA (Pasadena), had national reputations. They and the hundreds of disc jockeys who appeared on smaller stations, and who were seldom known outside of a rather limited geographical area, all contributed to country music's popularization in the postwar years, and each played a part in preserving much of the music's down-home distinctiveness while also extending its commercial appeal.

The long-range trend in the recording business, of course, was toward merger and consolidation. But in the fifties, scores of small companies specialized in the recording of country, blues, ethnic, and gospel performers. Gold Star in Houston, Four Star and Imperial in Los Angeles, Bullet in Nashville, Starday in Beaumont, Rich-R-Tone in Johnson City, Tennessee, Dot in Gallatin, Tennessee, Sun in Memphis, and King in Cincinnati were only a few of the labels that circulated country music in the postwar years. The most important of these record companies, King, was owned by Sydney Nathan in Cincinnati. Nathan began his career in the music business in the thirties as a record retailer, and during World War II he began buying used records which he then resold. His experience as a used record dealer introduced Nathan to the large population of southern migrants who lived in Cincinnati and its immediate environs. A recognition of their musical tastes led him, in August 1944, to the recording of both black and white talent. Grandpa Jones and Merle Travis, performing as the Sheppard

Brothers, made the first recording for King in 1944 in Dayton, Ohio. After that date a large number of important musicians, such as Lloyd "Cowboy" Copas, Moon Mullican, Harold "Hawkshaw" Hawkins, Clyde Moody, the York Brothers (George and Leslie), Jimmie Osborne, the Bailes Brothers, Wayne Raney, and the Delmore Brothers, recorded for the King label in its Cincinnati studios. Sydney Nathan took a personal interest in each recording and was therefore responsible for much of the distinctive sound heard on the King records. The King sound represented a fusion of southeastern and southwestern traits and was therefore indicative of the larger process of stylistic borrowing and blending then going on in country music. Even the most tradition-based entertainers, such as Grandpa Jones and the Bailes Brothers, typically combined electric guitars with the older, acoustic instruments on King records. Steel guitars probably would have been used in any case, but Syd Nathan loved to hear a tremolo sound on them, so he often implored his steel guitarists to "put more jelly"³ into their playing. Nathan also encouraged his black and white performers to use each other's material; consequently, King artists sometimes "covered" each other's records. The impulse toward the performance of blues and boogie material had always been strong among white musicians, but Nathan's encouragement was no doubt instrumental in the decision made by such King artists as the Delmore Brothers and Moon Mullican to record their classic boogie tunes in the early fifties.

The kind of field recording pioneered by such men as Ralph Peer and Frank Walker in the 1920's was gradually coming to an end in the 1950's. Nevertheless, the recording industry remained decentralized, and musicians were able to put their songs on wax or tape in a wide variety of cities from Cincinnati to Los Angeles. Many of Columbia's country recordings in the early fifties, for example, were made in the studios of Jim Beck in Dallas. Such singers as Marty Robbins, Ray Price, and Lefty Frizzell sang to the accompaniment of some of the large group of talented sidemen who lived in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The most significant development in recording, however, was the emergence of Nashville as a music center.

Much of Nashville's evolution toward musical preeminence is directly attributable to Paul Cohen. Cohen, who had been associated with Decca since the thirties, became that company's country artists-and-repertory director in the mid-forties. Cohen and the Decca company inaugurated the modern era of recording in Nashville in the spring of 1945 when Red Foley recorded in WSM's Studio B. In late 1945 or early 1946 two WSM engineers, Aaron Shelton and Carl Jenkins, organized a commercial recording enterprise called the Castle Recording Company with a studio in the Tulane Hotel. Cohen was the first A&R man to use the Castle facilities exten-

3. The Nathan quote came from Homer Bailes (interview, Jennings, Louisiana, August 16, 1974).

sively, and the recordings of such Decca artists as Red Foley, Ernest Tubb, and Kitty Wells were important milestones in Nashville's eventual emergence as one of the four or five music capitals of America.⁴ The Castle studios were used by virtually every recording company that utilized country talent, at least until Owen Bradley opened his barnlike studio in 1953 and until such companies as RCA began operating their own independent studios toward the end of the fifties.

The growing concentration of recording in Nashville led also to the appearance there of sessions musicians, that talented group of men, musically uneducated for the most part, who could improvise in any style. For all practical purposes, the first members of this fraternity were Red Foley's band—Zeke Turner, electric guitar; Jerry Byrd, steel guitar; Louis Innis, rhythm guitar; and Tommy Jackson, fiddle—who played on their leader's sessions and on numerous others, including those of the early Hank Williams, as well. This group, in effect, also became the house band for King records in Cincinnati in late 1948 when they sat in on the first of their many sessions there. By the early fifties other musicians had stationed themselves permanently in Nashville and were beginning to appear on most of the recordings made in the city: electric guitarists Hank Garland and Grady Martin, bass players Ernie Newton, Willie Thall, Hal Smith, and Junior Huskey, rhythm guitarist Ray Edenton, drummers Farris Coursey and Buddy Harman, and pianists Marvin Hughes, Gordon Stoker, and Owen Bradley. When Chet Atkins arrived in the city in 1950, as a guitarist for Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters, he immediately began to shape and direct the style of music heard in Nashville sessions. Atkins' smooth, finger-and-thumb style of playing was admired by every musician in Nashville, and he was soon employed by recording directors to gather appropriate pickers for various recording sessions. Most important of all, in 1952 he became assistant to Steve Sholes, RCA's chief recording man in Nashville, a step that would eventually put Atkins at the center of country music's revolutionary stylistic changes in the sixties.

Nashville's burgeoning as a leading music center, evidenced first by the assembling there of top-ranking country talent, was accentuated also by the arrival of the music entrepreneurs—the booking agents, the A&R men, the promoters, and the publishers. Sheet music had ceased to be the most important product of the music industry; instead, the typical music publishing house came to depend on phonograph recordings for its existence. After a song was copyrighted and published, the publishing house,

4. At least one scholar has challenged the conventionally held ideas about early Nashville recording. Cary Ginell claims to have uncovered evidence in the Decca files at MCA in Los Angeles showing that Red Foley's records of 1945–1947 were actually made in Chicago and given New York matrix numbers. Ginell has promised an article which will explore the subject further (letter from Cary Ginell, Reseda, California, April 24, 1984).

if it expected a financial return, had to get the song recorded by some performer. In effect, the publishing house became a vehicle for the recording of a written composition. Scores of publishing firms, many of them owned by country performers, eventually appeared in Nashville, but the giant among them was Acuff-Rose.

Acuff-Rose's ticket to commercial supremacy, and a vivid example of country music's great postwar expansion, was "The Tennessee Waltz." Now an international pop standard and one of Tennessee's state songs, "The Tennessee Waltz" was first released in 1948 as a hillbilly song (via Pee Wee King's and Cowboy Copas' recordings) which gained considerable immediate popularity and then was seemingly forgotten. Resurrected in November 1950 by popular vocalist Patti Page and considered, strangely enough, as the "B" side of her record, the song had become the nation's favorite by December of that year. "The Tennessee Waltz" was written by band leader and accordionist Pee Wee King and his vocalist Redd Stewart, who received the inspiration for the song after noting the popularity of Bill Monroe's "Kentucky Waltz" in 1948. "The Tennessee Waltz" was a typical country song in its depiction of a broken romance, but its simplicity and haunting melody made it a national favorite.

"The Tennessee Waltz" alone must be given much of the credit for country music's commercial surge and the future integration of America's popular music forms. By May 1951, 4,800,000 records of the song had been sold, and it had earned its writers and Acuff-Rose a gross of \$330,000. These totals did not include foreign-language recordings or rhythm-and-blues and minor country recordings. It was generally believed that "The Tennessee Waltz" was the biggest hit in modern popular music history, and it was certainly the top song ever licensed by BMI. The song brought extensive financial profit to its composers and launched Acuff-Rose on the road to publishing success. Acuff-Rose actually had been surprised by the song's popularity and had neglected, or had been unable, to exploit it nationally. The Nashville publishing firm had no contact people or business representation in the three traditionally accepted centers, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Country music's prosperity also stimulated the further growth of a song-writing industry. Country singers continued to write much of their own material, but the ranks of the professional composers grew enlarged as the music demonstrated its permanence and viability. As country music edged closer to pop, the distinctiveness of country songs began to fade somewhat, and some country songwriters, such as Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, even denied that there was a basic difference in the lyrics of the two musical forms. Nevertheless, country songs tended to concentrate on the concerns and preoccupations of working people and to have melodies that the average person could hum or sing. The music was "realistic" in that it sang less and less of mountain cabins, village churchyards, and

sunbonnet mothers, and more and more about the everyday concerns of urban-industrial existence. Country songs, however, seldom protested against larger political and social problems, but instead voiced a preoccupation with private sins and worries. Some songs responded joyously and affirmatively to life: some exhibited a healthy willingness to combat the world's problems and adversities; while others succumbed to guilt and self-pity or otherwise sought escape through nostalgia or fantasy.

The question of song authorship is often a cloudy and troublesome one. Song credits often reveal only the owner of a piece and not its composer or arranger. Rumors abound in country music that such-and-such individuals did not actually write the songs attributed to them, and the experience of songs sold outright by their writers for twenty-five dollars or so is more than just folklore. It is common knowledge among country musicians, for example, that Arthur Q. Smith of Knoxville wrote some of the hits of the fifties, and that his name appears on only a few of them. Jim Anglin has fared somewhat better. His authorship of such songs as "What about You" and "Ashes of Love" (recorded by Johnny and Jack) is properly recognized, but a much larger body of material, dating back to the early forties and appearing on scores of recordings (such as "Branded Wherever I Go" and "Stuck Up Blues"), has gone unacknowledged. Mac Odell, on the other hand, popularized his own song creations by performing them on radio stations throughout the South. Odell (whose real name is Odell McLeod) was one of several country-gospel performers in the fifties who kept alive the spirit of folk simplicity and down-home fundamentalism that had once been characteristic of country music. Such songs as "From the Manger to the Cross," "Purple Robe," "Thirty Pieces of Silver," and "The Stone Was Rolled Away," recorded in the fifties by such singers as Cowboy Copas and Wilma Lee Cooper, and since preserved by bluegrass musicians, demonstrated that some country music was indeed different from pop music.

Writers like Anglin and Odell preserved the folksiness of country music but regrettably received little commercial advantage from it. Closer to the commercial mainstream, and consequently better known, were such writers as Johnny Bond, Floyd Tillman, Jenny Lou Carson, Vaughn Horton, Cy Coben, Cindy Walker, and Felice and Boudleaux Bryant. Of all the writers of the fifties, Walker and the Bryants have exhibited the greatest endurance while also showing a remarkable ability to weather, and in fact to prosper from, successive stylistic changes in country music.

Walker's success has been a product of luck, pluck, and talent. While on a trip to Los Angeles with her parents in 1942 (her father was a Texas cotton merchant), she impulsively dropped in at Bing Crosby's office and persuaded Bing's manager to accept one of her songs, "The Lone Star Trail," for an upcoming Crosby film. Her very profitable association with Bob Wills began also in 1942 when she saw Wills' bus driving down a Los Angeles street on the way to a recording session. She was actually on the way

to a post office to mail a sheath of songs to Wills in Tulsa. A subsequent meeting with Wills and his manager, O. W. Mayo, at their hotel resulted in the successful auditioning of several of her songs. She wrote all of the songs used in Wills' movies, including the great standards "Dusty Skies" and "Cherokee Maiden." Since the mid-forties, beginning with the songs which she wrote for Al Dexter and Ernest Tubb, Walker has skillfully tailored her songs to fit the styles of specific singers. Few writers have equaled her ability to write country-pop love songs such as "Thank You for Calling" and "You Don't Know Me," honky-tonk numbers like "Bubbles in My Beer" and "Warm Red Wine," bluegrass songs like "Flying South to Dixie," cowboy songs such as "Dusty Skies," and teenie-bopper songs like Roy Orbison's "Dream Baby."

If anyone has demonstrated a similar versatility, it would surely be Felice and Boudleaux Bryant. From the time Jimmy Dickens recorded a composition of theirs called "Country Boy" in 1947, the Bryants have experienced over thirty-five years of commercial writing success. Their songs have always exhibited more of a "rural feel" than those of Cindy Walker, even though neither of the Bryants grew up with much exposure to country music: Felice was from Milwaukee, and Boudleaux studied violin at his home in Shellman, Georgia, with hopes of becoming a classical violinist. He played with Hank Penny's western swing band in Atlanta, however, and had received a thorough grounding in country music by the time he and Felice married in 1945. They have since written about 7,000 songs, and about 1,500 of them have been recorded. Such Bryant-composed songs as "We Could," "Take Me As I Am," and "Hey Joe" are known by all country singers, and their "Rocky Top" is the most famous bluegrass song in the world.

The writers wrote for a wide array of stylists in the late forties and early fifties, the last such display of stylistic diversity that the homogenizing country field would experience. "Traditional" is a relative term, and even the most "old-time" entertainers of the period, such as the Blue Sky Boys, Grandpa Jones, and Molly O'Day, exhibited certain stylistic traits which set them apart from the performers of earlier years. The Blue Sky Boys returned from military service with a style of harmony that was even more precise and clear than that of the prewar years. Their recordings now featured a bass and fiddle in addition to the mandolin and guitar, and their repertory included a greater percentage of modern-composed songs than in the thirties. Their beautiful performance of "Kentucky" in 1947 was probably the most commercially successful of their career. Their retirement in 1951, a product of conflicting career choices made by the brothers, came at the peak of their vocal powers.

The duet tradition persisted into the fifties, but only a few performers clung to the mandolin-and-guitar format. Martha and James Carson, known as the Barn Dance Sweethearts at WSB, used such instrumen-