

Preface

I am pleased that as a product of my initial foray into scholarship and a lifetime of devotion to the sounds I love, *Country Music USA* has endured for fifty years as a chronicle of country music's history and evolution. And I am also pleased to have been given the opportunity to revise it once again—the last chance that I will probably have. Consequently, I have tried meticulously to correct mistakes, clarify my language, update tenses, add new information, and take advantage of new insights. I have also been joined in the enterprise by a gifted young scholar, Tracey Laird, who has written a new concluding chapter.

My romance with country music began long before this book was conceived. It has been about eighty years since the little Philco battery radio came into our farmhouse in East Texas (a little community, now vanished, called Galena—about twenty miles west of Tyler), bringing a touch of the outside world, along with the music of the Carter Family, the Chuck Wagon Gang, the Stamps Quartet, the Shelton Brothers, the Callahan Brothers, Cowboy Slim Rinehart, and the many performers of the *National Barn Dance* and the *Grand Ole Opry*. For me, it was the beginning of a love affair that has never ceased. It has been even longer than that since I first heard my mother singing old-fashioned sentimental songs like “The Eastbound Train” and “Prisoner at the

Bar,” or pouring out her soul in religious tunes like “Farther Along” and “Leave It There.” My older brothers, Wylie and Kelly, began trying out their voices on what we then called hillbilly music when they were about fourteen or fifteen years old, strumming on a cheap guitar that Wylie had obtained in a trade with our neighbor Thomas Starr, plowing for him for about a week. Through my brothers, and through the voices that sang to us over the battery radio, songs like “The Last Letter” and “It Makes No Difference Now” moved into my consciousness alongside the gospel and sentimental parlor pieces learned from my mother.

I sang country music all my life but made no serious attempts to learn the guitar until my graduate days at the University of Texas in Austin. Until I learned my first chords, such friends as Tom Crouch and Willie Benson wore out their fingers accompanying me as I sang at parties and beer busts in the Austin area. I eventually discovered Threadgill’s, a now-famous bar and restaurant in North Austin, where I sang a couple of times a week in the informal jam sessions that prevailed around the big circular wooden tables. It was my notoriety as an amateur country singer that led to the writing of this book. In December 1960, I traveled to Houston with a few graduate student friends and my supervising professor, Joe B. Frantz, to see the Texas Longhorn football team play in the Bluebonnet Bowl. We sang songs all the way to Houston, with Dr. Frantz requesting song after song, and that evening during dinner he suggested that I choose as a doctoral dissertation a business history of Nashville music publishing. Once the work was begun, I expanded the topic to its present limits with his blessing. I will always be thankful that in history, a conservative discipline, Dr. Frantz exhibited such tolerance for an unorthodox subject—the first academic study of country music. The dissertation eventually became *Country Music USA*, bearing a title suggested by the folklorist John Greenway.

When I began my research, Austin had not yet become a hotbed of live music performance. I was far removed from the few people who did serious collecting or scholarship in the field of country music and was largely unaware of their existence. The two major country music repositories—the Country Music Foundation in Nashville and the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill—did not exist when I began my research in 1961 and were still in their infancy by the time the book was published in 1968.

The resources for studying the phenomenon of country music were sketchy and widely scattered. In the decades that have passed since the original publication, an explosion of scholarship has occurred, and many writers, both academic and popular, have entered the field, unearthing new information and fresh perspectives. In addition to the archival resources that now exist in Nashville and Chapel Hill, a wealth of musical material also awaits the scholar on the web—in websites, blogs, published books and articles, iTunes, YouTube offerings, and related items that can no longer be found anywhere else. Country music itself, as a dynamic and ever-changing facet of American popular culture, has burgeoned and metamorphosed since the late sixties. The careers of many musicians have faded, while others have blossomed; others will have bloomed and withered by the time this new edition appears.

I believe that *Country Music USA* has done its part to tell country music's story around the world while also lending some respectability to its serious academic treatment. Country music courses are now taught in many colleges and universities; theses and dissertations assay the field in a variety of scholarly disciplines—even in music departments where they were once rare—and academic papers dealing with country music are annually presented at conventions and symposia. The International Country Music Conference (ICMC) has now been meeting annually in Nashville for over thirty years, giving scholars opportunities to share their insights. Almost a decade elapsed, however, before my own discipline, history, paid any serious attention to the study of country music. A milestone of sorts was reached in November 1977, when I gave a lecture-concert on country music, accompanied by a bluegrass band, at the opening session of the Southern Historical Association convention in New Orleans. Thirty years later, I gave another solo presentation, at the meeting of the same organization and in the same city, on the occasion of this book's fortieth anniversary. This was a considerable advance, indeed, for an association that had previously ignored country music at its convention sessions and in its journal, and that had once had as a president an eminent historian of the South—Thomas D. Clark—who referred to the “hillbilly rabble” of radio in one of his books.¹

I hope that my perspective as both a historian and a fan of country music has worked to assure balance in my study, although my biases have no doubt affected my perceptions and interpretations. Still, I have

striven for objectivity and have attempted to be fair to those styles that I do not like. My personal preferences clearly lean toward hard-core country, and to singers with individuality whose sounds and styles reflect their rural or working-class origins—whether they are “down-home” stylists like the Blue Sky Boys, Molly O’Day, the Bailes Brothers, and Ralph Stanley, or honky-tonk performers like Ernest Tubb, George Jones, Merle Haggard, and Dale Watson. To purists like me, country music has been inundated by musicians whose sounds suggest neither regional, rustic, nor blue-collar nativity, but are instead rooted in the homogenizing and mass-consumption-oriented media establishment. On the other hand, the continued emergence of musicians—such as the Carolina Chocolate Drops, the Quebe Sisters, Sturgill Simpson, and Jason Isbell, who effectively fuse modernity and tradition—and the remarkable growth of interest in old-time string band music indicate the existence of a large audience hungry for more “authentic” fare and therefore grateful to find something palpable rather than plastic. May there always be such a public to keep these impulses alive.

My debts are many, and I have tried to acknowledge them in the bibliographical essays. As noted in the first edition, the real sources of this book are the many musicians, professional and amateur, who have captivated my interest since I was a child. While I can neither name nor repay all of them, I can at least acknowledge the profound impact they have had on my life. Among the many nonmusicians who have provided both friendship and research support, I still feel the need to single out three individuals: Jo Walker-Meador and the late Bob Pinson and Archie Green. Bob Pinson, onetime Director of Acquisitions for the Country Music Foundation Library, sought me out during the early stages of my dissertation research (when he was a private collector in Southern California) and never ceased to be unselfish in his aid and encouragement. Archie Green was known and revered by every student of American vernacular music. One of our greatest folklorists, Green was a model of indefatigability, limitless ideas, and insatiable curiosity. He was an inspiration to all who knew him. Jo Walker-Meador, who served for many years as the Executive Director of the Country Music Association, was with that organization at its beginnings and was a prime force in its remarkable expansion. Without her help back in 1961 in arranging interviews and providing contacts, my first research trip to Nashville might very well have proved fruitless.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother and father, Maude and Cleburne Malone, and to my wife, Bobbie. My parents bequeathed to me the culture of which country music is a part as well as a special love and respect for that music's primacy in their lives. Bobbie came to me with little knowledge of or experience with country music, but in the years since our marriage began she has become an accomplished mandolin player and a good country singer. Above all, she has given me a special love that I never believed possible. In the words of the Ricky Skaggs song, "I wouldn't change a single thing."

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1985, 2010, 2018

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Bill Malone's original publication of *Country Music USA* launched an entire field of study. His work definitively surveyed country music's territory, asserting a scope and range of style wide and deep enough to inspire scholars of music, language, geography, history, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy for decades afterward. His work canvasses country's varied sounds and underscores concerns about its production, artistry, audiences, and expressive culture; in a spirit of exhaustive exploration, *Country Music USA* engages far-reaching questions about media, race, gender, region, and identity.

It is hard to find a scholar working on country music today who cannot point to something in Malone's original book that planted a seed for future work. My own career constitutes a case in point. In his encyclopedic grasp of country music history, Bill mentions the radio barn dance *Louisiana Hayride* and describes the distinctive music scene in Austin, Texas. These became the focal points for two decades of my scholarly research and writing. That said, my contributions to this project have been circumscribed in comparison to the sweeping impact the first-edition *Country Music USA* had on me as a scholar.

Country Music USA was not my first encounter with Bill's work. That came more by accident or, it seems with hindsight, kismet. I recall laboring in the music library as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. I had burned out on reading and listening assignments in preparation for a class about the music of Tchaikovsky,

and so my attention wandered to materials on the shelves all around me. I grabbed a boxed set—the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Country Music*—and lowered the phonograph needle onto the first spinning disc.

The sounds pouring forth from the record player sparked a surge of joy, and I kept listening until the library closed its doors that night. Perhaps it was a sense of comfort and familiarity derived from music that took me back to my grandparents' kitchen in Shreveport, Louisiana, not far from Bill's hometown of Galena. Pampaw and Micmaw tuned their set to Shreveport's clear-channel 50,000-watt station KWKH for the better part of each day. The musical sounds also sparked my curiosity. I opened the Smithsonian Collection's liner notes for my first encounter with Bill Malone, who had also curated the music.

Bill's scholarly apprehension of the story of country music has shaped me as a student, teacher, and writer. His feedback, critique, and encouragement throughout my scholarly undertakings likewise have been invaluable. I'm honored to contribute my perspective on country music during the twenty-first century to this fiftieth anniversary edition. In doing so, I do not attempt to mirror Bill's exhaustive approach. Instead, I plumb a handful of significant examples that in some way address country music's meaning, identity, and relationship with its multiple audiences. Essentially I address how a twenty-first-century listener might answer the question, "What is *real* country music?"

For my part, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude and love for Brandon, the source for never-ending inspiration and support, both editorial and, more broadly speaking, lifewise. Henry and Zoey equally amaze, encourage, humble, and fill me with pride and joy every day. Family, loved ones, friends, and colleagues in Georgia, Louisiana, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, Indiana, and elsewhere keep me going in ways of which they are likely unaware. I dedicate this project to Big Annie, who invariably "just can't wait to get on the road again."

TEWL

2018

**COUNTRY
MUSIC USA**

