

Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class Music in American Life. By Bill C. Malone. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. xvi + 392 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-252-02678-0.

Reviewed by Don H. Doyle

Bill C. Malone, emeritus professor of history at Tulane University, is the leading authority on the history of American country music. His 1968 book, *Country Music, USA* (revised in 1985), set the music within a historical context of modernization that swept through the South in the twentieth century. It remains the starting place for any serious study of the subject. Since then a large body of scholarly and popular publications has considerably expanded our understanding of this important genre of music. Malone's latest contribution updates and amplifies many of the themes introduced in his earlier volume, but it also takes us in several new directions. This is the work of a master historian fully in command of his subject, brimming with knowledge of the music and performers, and full of insight into the historical meaning of both.

The author is an unashamed fan of country music in two senses. First, he identifies with the music and with what he describes as its southern, working-class roots. He also defies the snobbish condescension so many people hold for the music, its performers, and its audience. We know this because he indulges in autobiographical forays to tell us he is the son of a Texas farmer, that he is himself a musician, and that he is an enthusiastic admirer of what he refers to as "traditional" country music. Second, he admits freely that his personal tastes as a fan and his personal identity as a southerner of rural, working-class origin, have influenced his interpretation of the music: "the passionate predilections of the fan," he tells us, "contend with the wary skepticism of the scholar" (p. 257). He switches without apology from the first-person voice of a concerned devotee who worries that the traditions of country music are being threatened by commercialism and the South's modernization to that of the objective historian analyzing the business strategies that drive the musical innovation. The book is probably richer for this subjectivity and opinion; Malone brings a unique combination of a fan's

enthusiasm and a historian's understanding of the larger context surrounding the music and its audience.

Malone identifies several salient themes of the country music tradition: home and family, religion, rambling, humor, and politics. Rather than adopting the usual historical approach to change over time, Malone instead takes up each of these topics separately. Because he does not always develop them in relation to the historical narrative of social change, they are left to float in time, without causation and with no clear relation to one another. As a study of southern culture, this book could be of real value to anyone interested in the massive transformation of the South from a solid bastion of Democratic Party loyalty into a white Republican stronghold. This shift, of course, was a reaction to the Civil Rights movement and to the elevation of blacks within the Democratic Party, but it was much more than just that. The notes and chords the new Right began to play resonated with the "Okie from Muskogee," who did not smoke pot, burn draft cards, dishonor the flag, or repudiate motherhood and patriotism. Malone seems reluctant to emphasize the important alliance between country music and the backlash against liberal Democrats that was so effectively exploited by the new Republican Right. He reminds us that country music once incorporated a tradition of protest songs sympathetic to working people and the underdog, but he also shows that the political was usually subordinated to the personal. It is clear, however, that for many country music was for people who disdained left-leaning "folk" music, black rhythm and blues, and especially rock music, which had cross-bred black and white musical strains. Fans of country music were often those who defined themselves in opposition to devotees of these other genres; musical preference thus became a signifier of class, race, and political identity. Country music may have been preeminently southern and working class in origin, but it was above all the music of white people, a musical form that remained essentially segregated from black musicians and fans. Several performers openly embraced George Wallace's campaign and most backed conservative Republican candidates in state and national elections. Whereas a few musicians like Johnny Rebel recorded strident racist music, the lyrics and public statements of most conservative country music stars rarely referred directly to racial matters or other political issues. Celebrations of patriotism and family values were the preferred modes of conservative musical expression among most country

music performers. That these wholesome values coexisted with images of rowdy, honky-tonk, hard-drinking, cheating, divorcing, and hard-living men and women is only one of the many contradictions and hypocrisies that Malone enjoys dishing up for us in this book.

Malone worries that country music has become overly commercial, with performers or their managers too willing to compromise in order to go mainstream, a trend he sees paralleled in the loss of a distinctive southern culture. The story he tells, however, is one of a musical genre undergoing constant innovation in response to a changing market. What was once called “hillbilly” music became a commercial product even before the 1920s, when urban radio stations like Nashville’s WSM used the “Grand Ole Opry” to market ready-made flour or life insurance. The performers, as Malone delights in pointing out, were rarely pure “country,” but neither was their audience. City dwellers who had forsaken rural life found in country music an expression of their nostalgia and a white version of urban blues. Today Nashville country music stars whom an older generation once disdained as being not “real country” express their own disapproval of stars like Shania Twain or Garth Brooks for their lack of authenticity. Richard Peterson’s recent book, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (1999) analyzes this phenomenon by looking more closely than Malone chooses to at the producers and marketing experts who manipulate the performers’ images in an effort to appeal to the intended audience. What Malone shows us, both in his very informed portrait of country music performers and in his own autobiography, is that there is something in the music that connects with the lives of real people. Whether a romantic escape from that reality or a wailing expression of its hardships, the country music business seems able to shift continuously into new chords that resonate with the changes in the lives of its audience.

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