Country was birthed in Appalachia, grew up in the South, and thrived in Southern cities.

**Western Swing**

The traditional string bands, autoharps and dulcimers of Appalachia gave way to newer styles as country music's popularity grew and spread throughout the South and Southwest. Nashville, Tennessee, emerged as country music's capital city, but other areas added their own flavor to country music, including Jimmie Rodgers' adopted home state of Texas, where "country" was expanded into "country & western." Country music's rustic, "common folk" appeal, coupled with the image of the drifting loner popularized by Rodgers, blended easily into the romantic cowboy and western themes popularized in songs and movies. Free from the backwoods "hillbilly" stigma of other country styles, "Singing Cowboys" like Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers brought a smooth and sentimental version of country music to a wide audience during the Depression and World War II years, when the image of tough American cowboys held a particularly strong and patriotic appeal. The cowboy songs were stocked with the requisite references to "little dogies," "Old Paint," jingling spurs, ropin' and ridin' and wide-open spaces and were generally sung with smooth voices sweetened by strings, choirs and Hollywood orchestras. (Cowgirls were popular as well: Patsy Montana yodeled her way to the first country music hit for a female singer in 1935 with "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart.")

Country showed strength in smooth, masculine, cowboy music.

"Western" meant more than Singing Cowboys, however. Texas, Oklahoma and the surrounding areas were dotted with bars and dance halls in the 1930's, thanks to an oil boom that softened the blow of the Depression. Like the juke joints of the deep South that were home to the blues, the "honky-tonks on the outskirts of town" spawned a subculture fueled by hard working, hard drinking and hard dancing, and by a musical style tough and rhythmic enough to keep it all going. Although the term "western swing" was not widely used until the mid-forties, a big-beat dance style swept the Southwest and gained national popularity in the late thirties and through the War years. With a mandate to make people dance and forget their troubles, western swing musicians looked beyond country music to a more obvious source of earthiness and rhythmic vitality—to the blues, jazz and to the big band music that put the "swing" in "western swing."

There was a gaining desire for tough and dance-driven music to get people's minds off of the Depression & World War.

Bandleader **Bob Wills** (1905-75), the "King of Western Swing," began his recording career in 1929 with a version of Bessie Smith's "Gulf Coast Blues.". He continued to incorporate black styles, adding the influence of Dixieland jazz and band leaders like Kansas City's Count Basie to his country two-step sound and sentimental popular selections. With star vocalist Tommy Duncan up front, Wills' gradually expanded his group, the Texas Playboys, to include piano, accordion, and sax and horn sections modeled after big band swing. The Texas Playboys further shocked the crowd at the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1945 by being the first to use drums on the show—blasphemy to country purists, but a key ingredient in Wills' rhythmic dance style.

Drums were not kosher to country musicians! That style rule broken by Bob Wills.

The guitar remained the premier instrument in western swing, however. (The prominence of the guitar is another feature that links country music and the blues and distinguished them both from pop, jazz and rhythm & blues, where the guitar remained primarily a supporting rhythm instrument.) Country music developed its own distinct guitar sound, partly due by a fad for the exotic wave-like sound of the Hawaiian guitar, created by fretting the neck of the guitar with a steel bar. A similar "steel guitar" style became one of country music's defining traits, with the added influence of the bottleneck slide styles developed by the blues players. (The playing styles were quite different,

↑ Clarified in the parenthetical, but totally different instruments...

however: blues players usually held the guitar normally, while country steel players usually held the guitar in their laps or, later, stood to play the free-standing electrified versions.)

The steel guitar, manufactured by the National and Dobro companies beginning in the late 1920's, was used in all country styles. It's not surprising, however, that western swing groups were the first to exploit *amplification* as a way of further expanding their big band sound. The electric steel guitar was first manufactured in 1931 and was commonly used in western swing bands by late thirties. Here, too, the influence of jazz was pronounced: early solos, by pioneers like Texas Playboy Leon McAuliffe and Bob Dunn of Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies, often mimicked jazz sax solos in timbre and style. The bent and blue notes of the blues was also a natural influence on the steel players, who, in turn, influenced Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker and other early electric jazz and blues guitarists in a continuing cross-pollination between the styles. The mid-forties saw the introduction of further advancements: the pedal steel guitar, which offered a rich new range of timbres, and the solid body electric guitar, the most popular of which were made by Les Paul, who built his first solid body in 1941, and Leo Fender (who also introduced an electric bass guitar in 1951).