The Grand Ole Opry

Western swing remained popular mainly in the Southwest and in California after World War II, though it did directly influence rock & roll via Bill Haley and His Comets—a western swing combo from the Pennsylvania that was originally called Bill Haley and His Saddlemen, until their bandleader fell under the spell of Louis Jordan and rhythm & blues. The "purer" country music of the South and Southeast reclaimed its predominance in the 1940's and reached a wide audience via recordings and radio broadcasts. Nashville cemented its place at the center of the country world with the live shows and radio broadcasts from the *Grand Ole Opry*, the "Mother Church of Country Music." Live radio broadcasts were crucial to the growth of country music, just as they helped spread jazz, blues and swing music. Chicago's WLS beamed a "Barn Dance" program throughout the Midwest beginning in 1924. A year later, Nashville station WSM launched its own "Barn Dance," which was renamed the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1927. The show was dominated by old-time string bands in the early days, and benefited from Nashville's proximity to country's Appalachian headwaters. Its first notable personality was Uncle Dave Macon, a banjo playing comic who relied on down-home humor and a vast storehouse of country, folk, minstrel and vaudeville songs.

Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb

Has a record store named after him on Broadway in Nashville.

The first true singing star of the *Grand Ole Opry* was Roy Acuff (1903-92), who came to the Opry in 1938, straight from his home in the Appalachian foothills of Eastern Tennessee. Acuff was an institution in Nashville for over half a century, as both an entertainer and as the co-founder, with Fred Rose in 1942, of the Acuff-Rose publishing house, the first publisher devoted exclusively to country music.[i] Acuff's best-known songs, including "The Great Speckled Bird" and "The Precious Jewel," were sung with a guileless sincerity and respect for tradition that packed a powerful emotional punch, especially during the War years: "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."[ii] The war itself brought young Americans of all backgrounds and from all regions together, and was a major factor in the nationwide spread of country music's popularity. In fact, Roy Acuff won a popularity poll among servicemen sponsored by the Armed Forces Network, which beamed country music alongside the music of Frank Sinatra and the swing bands. In one famous incident on Okinawa, the Japanese charged the American lines hurling the worst insults they could think of: "To hell with Roosevelt! To hell with Babe Ruth! To hell with Roy Acuff!"

Texan Ernest Tubb came to the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1943 after scoring his first hit in 1941 with "Walking the Floor Over You." Tubb began his singing career as a Jimmie Rodgers clone, until the removal of his tonsils in 1939 also removed his ability to yodel and forced him to develop his own style. The "**honky-tonk**" style he perfected became the model for Hank Williams and the dominant style of country music, virtually synonymous with pure "country" in most people's minds. Tubb's choked acoustic guitar style, played as much for the backbeat rhythm as for the chords, set the feel for the dance beat of honky-tonk, which was created without the benefit of a drummer (much as Elvis Presley's rhythmic acoustic guitar playing grounded his drum-less early rockabilly recordings). Tubb also popularized the use of the electric lead guitar in the Southeast,

Tubb invents Honky-Tonk b/c his tonsils are removed.

while his flat, folksy singing epitomized the casual warmth and honesty that appealed to country fans and invited the scorn of more "sophisticated" ears. Ernest Tubb was second in popularity only to Roy Acuff through the forties, though the dancing beat and the cheatin', drinkin' and heartache imagery of his songs seemed far removed from Acuff's Smoky Mountain piety.

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[i]The success of Acuff-Rose prompted other publishing houses and record companies to follow suit and open offices and recording studios in Nashville, solidifying the city's stature in the late forties.

[ii]Bill Malone, "Country Music U.S.A." (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 192.