COUNTRY & WESTERN

The blues and its rhythm & blues offspring were the most direct influences on rock & roll, but other musical genres contributed as well and brought added dimensions that kept it from being merely an imitation of R&B. At its best, country music resonated with all the depth and emotional honesty of the blues. It was the native sound of the rural white South and the home style of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly and all of the other "rockabillies" who brought a distinctly country accent rock & roll.

It makes sense that the South was the region where white musicians were first able to incorporate an essentially black style to create their own brand of rock & roll. The blues, country music, gospel and other "folk" music's of the South always existed side-by-side, and though racial hatred was a fact of life, coexisting was a fact as well—much more than in the supposedly "equal" but very separate racial worlds of the North. And while the audiences may have been segregated, the music never was: southern musicians had borrowed from and influenced each other since the music of the slaves first caught the plantation owners' nervous and fascinated ears, and country musicians and blues musicians had borrowed from each other before either music had a name.

"The Sources of Country Music," a mural by Thomas Hart Benton at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, depicts country music's varied roots, showing Appalachian dulcimers and fiddles, a banjo played by rural black man, a guitar playing cowboy, a church choir, a riverboat and train passing by, a cowboy saddle, a moonshine jug... Country music's heritage runs deep into America's past, back to the early settlers and to British folk songs and other European folk styles that were brought to America and gradually transformed by the harsh new land and by new musical ideas and cultural settings.

Bill Monroe (1911-1996), the founder of bluegrass music, recalled the varied sources and influences on even his style: "It's got an old-time fiddle and string band feeling, but I put the hard rhythm drive in there with my mandolin. There's a feeling of the Methodists and Baptists singers in the music, too, and Scotch bagpipe playing and southern blues, too—I always loved the blues, and I wanted to put the feeling of the blues in my music."[i] The timeless sound of bluegrass was literally invented by Monroe in the early 1940's, and despite its varied sources and the breakneck virtuosity that balanced its "high, lonesome sound," bluegrass remained the most self-consciously traditional of country styles, sticking with acoustic instruments and sentimental rural themes while other country styles adapted and moved ahead. Like Muddy Waters, Bill Monroe clung proudly to his roots even as he updated them for a new, urbanized reality. He even made a mark on rock & roll: Monroe's 1946 classic, "Blue Moon of Kentucky," took an unlikely leap into rock history as the flipside of Monroe fan Elvis Presley's first single. ("He came and apologized for the way he changed it around, and I told him he was gonna sell a lot of records with that and I was for him a hundred percent."[ii]) The other side of the single was "That's All Right," an earthy blues by Arthur Crudup that also dated from 1946, and it was the bold surprise of a "country boy playing the blues" that helped ignite rock & roll. Elvis' fusion of blues and country seemed—and was—startlingly new in 1954, but it was also the culmination of many decades of white borrowings from the blues.

The Carter Family

Country music in the early 1900's consisted largely of Appalachian string bands who had already incorporated the African-derived banjo and the influence of black styles of fiddle and guitar playing. With the rising popularity of radio and recordings in the 1920's, country music began reaching a wider audience and vocalists began to dominate the sound. The most widely famous of the early country artists were the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, both of whom launched their recording careers at an open audition in 1927 in Bristol, Tennessee.

The Carter Family consisted of A. P. Carter on fiddle and his wife Sara and sister-in-law Maybelle on vocals, autoharp and guitar. Between 1927 and 1941 the Carter Family recorded over 300 songs, preserving a rich heritage of traditional country and folk material—sacred and secular—along with A. P. Carter's original songs. (Carter wrote several classics but also copyrighted many traditional songs under his own name, reflecting the same liberal interpretation of "authorship" found among blues singers.) The Carter Family built their group style around the alternating strumming and thumb-picking of Maybelle's guitar playing, which mixed melodic bass lines with strummed chords and established an entire school of country guitar picking.

The Carter Family embodied the musical values and social conservatism of the South, rooted firmly in tradition and God-fearing Christianity. Although they occasionally recorded songs in blues forms (usually denoted by a "blues" in the title, as in "Worried Man Blues"), their enduring popularity was based largely on the upright sentiment and the reassuring evocation of the past reflected in songs like "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," "Wabash Cannonball" and "Wildwood Flower." Maybelle and her daughters continued performing as the Carter Family into the 1970's, reaching new audiences through daughter June's marriage to Johnny Cash, who booked them on his tours and television shows. (Granddaughter Carlene Carter now keeps the seventy-year family dynasty alive.)

Jimmie Rodgers

Jimmie Rodgers (1897-1933) was a friend and fellow traveler of the Carter Family and a similarly encyclopedic collector of traditional songs and styles. Rodgers grew up in Mississippi, however, not in the Virginia hills that were home to the Carter Family, and he grew up familiar with both black and white styles and was at home with the blues to a degree unprecedented among recorded white artists. Rodgers was also tuned to the latest Tin Pan Alley hits, risqué novelty songs and sentimental ballads, and was not at all shy about mixing up his styles and audience, but he laid his greatest claim to the future with his convincing appropriation of black styles—by popularizing the black borrowings that had informed white folk music for years, and by formulating the country-plus-blues equation that eventually equaled rock & roll. (The blues players were equally attuned to their white counterparts: several of Rodgers' songs joined the blues vernacular, and his influence even extended to artists as far afield from country as Howlin' Wolf, who claimed that he "wanted to yodel like Jimmie Rodgers" but couldn't, so he howled instead.)

Rodgers wrote a good portion of his own material and often mixed blues licks and bent notes into his country style or fit his country style into an earthy 12-bar blues peppered with stock blues phrases and his trademark "blue yodels," as in his "**Blue Yodel #1**," recorded in 1927:

T for Texas, T for Tennessee,
T for Texas, T for Tennessee,
T for Thelma—that gal that made a wreck out of me.

If you don't want me mama, you sure don't have to stall,
If you don't want me mama, you sure don't have to stall,
'cause I can get more women than a passenger train can haul.

I'm gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I'm tall,
I'm gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I'm tall,
I'm gonna shoot poor Thelma, just to see her jump and fall.

And so on... Each verse is capped—almost dementedly so, considering poor Thelma—with the carefree yodel he made his trademark, while the even strumming rhythm and alternating low string bass notes of his guitar are clear blueprints for the basic feel of country music. The 12-bar form and earthy lyrics, however, were lifted straight out of the blues. (All of the song's verses were taken from the blues vernacular; the second, for example, can be found in Bessie Smith's 1924 recording of "Ticket Agent, Ease Your Window Down.") This prescient blending of blues and country styles earned Rodgers a spot alongside Robert Johnson in the first round of inductions to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame's "Early Influences" category.

Jimmie Rodgers projected the image of a vagabond loner, riding the rails from town to town, tavern to tavern and woman to woman, hell-bent on living every moment his advancing tuberculosis allowed him. His romanticized, hard-living lifestyle and larger-than-life image was an important part of his appeal, as it would be for later country and rock stars, and represented the *other* side of country music and southern culture—the Saturday night side that fueled the Sunday morning guilt and repentance. Often called the "Father of Country Music," Rodgers was the first true country *star*, and he exerted a tremendous influence on those who followed: Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe, Ernest Tubb, Hank Snow, Gene Autry and many other country giants began their careers singing his songs and copying his style (even his yodels, which were a key emotional element of many cowboy songs). While the Carter Family helped preserve the roots and rich heritage of country music, Rodgers' eclectic borrowings and personal imprint pushed country toward a bigger world and broader expressive palette.

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[i] Bill Monroe, in conversation with the author, September, 1992.
[ii] ibid.