



Country Music

by Tina Gianoulis

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Country music, like blues and jazz, is a peculiarly American musical form. With its roots in the folk ballads of England, Scotland, and Ireland, country music was born in the blend of the "hillbilly" music of the Appalachian mountains, the African-American blues of the deep South, and the wailing twang of the cowboy music of the West.

But country music is more than a combination of various musical traditions. Lyrics give life to country music and those lyrics tell the real stories of ordinary people. Country music celebrates the trials and triumphs, loves and losses in the lives of small town, rural, and, more recently, urban, mostly white, working people.

Because of its focus on conservative social groups and old-fashioned values, country music has often been associated with bigotry, intolerance, and jingoistic patriotism. However, every kind of personal lifestyle, quirk, and foible is represented in the backroads and small towns of the United States, and country music has found room to discuss most of them frankly. Although country is in some ways one of the most conservative of musical genres, country songs cover a wider range of topics than almost any other type of popular music.

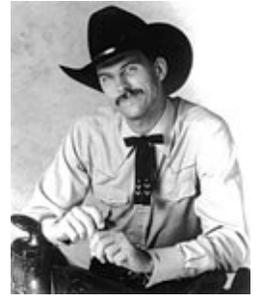
Gay and lesbian audiences are attracted to the country scene for several reasons. First, the sincerity of country's exploration of the emotions and experiences of working people draws many disenfranchised Americans to country. Then, there are the outfits. Ever since country left its simple hillbilly roots behind, the pageantry of bouffant hair and spangled cowboy shirts has been as much a part of the country music scene as wailing fiddles and moaning slide guitars.

Many gay men, unable to resist a pageant, are drawn to the campy side of country, even as they also appreciate the directness of the music's emotional appeal. The adulation of gay men has been particularly important to the legends of such larger-than-life country music performers as Patsy Cline and Dolly Parton. Moreover, many gay men have been attracted to country music by the recent advent of such "country hunks" as Dwight Yoakum, Alan Jackson, and Billy Ray Cyrus.

Lavender Country

In 2000, an unprecedented intersection of the gay community and country music occurred when the album *Lavender Country* by the band of the same name was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee, as the first openly gay country music album. Released in 1973 by a Seattle organization called Gay Community Social Services, *Lavender Country* was the direct result of the newly erupting gay liberation movement.

Patrick Haggerty, the founder of the band as well as its main songwriter, grew up working on his family's small dairy farm in Port Angeles, Washington. Country music had been the soundtrack of his childhood, and when he became a radical gay activist, country was the natural vehicle for him to express both the newly



Singer Jeff Miller finds a welcoming venue at International Gay Rodeo Association events. Publicity photograph provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau. Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

public emotional life of gay men and their desire for social change. Songs like "Back in the Closet Again" and "Singing These Cocksucking Blues" added a new dimension to country's traditional themes of heartbreak and hope.

Other Gay Country Singers

Lavender Country has been followed by other gay country music singers, many of whom were also raised on the country sound. Doug Stevens, songwriter and front singer with the Outband grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi, and left his country roots behind to study classical music. When his lover left him after learning that Stevens was HIV-positive, however, he found that composing country songs best expressed his pain.

Other gay country singers such as Sid Spencer, Mark Weigle, Jeff Miller, and David Alan Mors find a welcoming venue at events sponsored by the International Gay Rodeo Association, founded in 1985 to unite more than twenty gay rodeo organizations in the United States and Canada. In 1998, the Lesbian and Gay Country Music Association was formed to support gay country musicians and to promote country music within the gay community.

Lesbians and Country Music

Lesbians have always been drawn to strong women, and lesbian interest in country was often expressed in the early 1970s by widespread crushes on such apparently straight country singers as tough-talking Tanya Tucker, deep-voiced Anne Murray, and down-to-earth glamour girl Dolly Parton.

Probably the best known lesbian country singer is Canada's k.d. lang, whose rich, sophisticated voice practically forced the country world to take her in. Although lang released three acclaimed country albums (*A Truly Western Experience* in 1984, *Angel With a Lariat* in 1987, and *Absolute Torch and Twang* in 1989) and delighted lesbian audiences with her overtly butch appearance on stage, she did not come out as a lesbian until 1992. Since then, lang has drifted away from country, becoming mostly a pop singer.

Other lesbian singers came from the folk tradition, and thus were comfortable with a country song or two, but few were mainly identified as country. Since the birth of women's music in the early 1970s, Alix Dobkin, Woody Simmons, Robin Flower, Teresa Trull, and Barbara Higbie have demonstrated definite country influence as they appear at women's coffeehouses, clubs, and festivals. Groups like the Reel World String Band, Deadly Nightshade, and Ranch Romance draw crowds of hooting, foot-stomping lesbians to concerts that rival any country hoe-down.

Country Western Dancing

In the mid-1980s, another phenomenon gained popularity among both gay men and lesbians--country western dancing. Drawn to the flash and polish of country line dancing and two-step, gay men and lesbians from Dallas to New York City and from Los Angeles to Toronto flock to country music dance clubs.

They dress in bolos and pointy-toed boots and learn the Texas two-step and line dances with names like "Achy Breaky Heart" and "Boot-Scootin' Boogie." On these dance floors those who grew up listening to the "Grand Ole Opry" meet with those who grew up listening to rock and roll to dress in costume and move in the tightly controlled syncopation of the cowboy dance.

Political Attitudes

There are, however, many within the lesbian and gay communities who decry the increased popularity of country music, pointing out that country speaks to a straight, conservative, white society and that many fans of country music are homophobic and racist. In particular, gay men and lesbians of color have often felt alienated by the country craze, seeing it as the glorification of those who enforced segregation in the

South and destroyed Native American society in the West.

Still, queer lovers of country music can point to such stars as multiple grammy winner Garth Brooks, who has been publicly supportive of gay rights. Brooks even released a song, "We Shall Be Free," that includes in its definition of liberty the freedom to love whomever you choose. Even when it created a storm of controversy, Brooks stood behind his song, leading many gay and lesbian country fans to hope that country music can, indeed, find a place for everyone.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.