

FEBRUARY 89

Country star
Randy Travis

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EUROPE

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NASHVILLE COMES TO BRITAIN

COUNTRY SOUNDS STRIKE
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COUNTRY INVADES

BRITAIN

Country music is beginning to make an impact on the British scene.

In the Andrew Lloyd Webber hit musical, *Starlight Express*, one of the railway characters, Dinah the Dining Car, sings a number titled "U.N.C.O.U.P.L.E.D." It has a pure, country sound, with whining guitars, lamenting piano, 2/4 beat and a Tennessee hill vocal:

*I've been U.N.C.O.U.P.L.E.D.
I can't bring myself to say it. No siree.
I'm a carriage with no marriage,
I'm a van without a man.
I've been U.N.C.O.U.P.L.E.D.*

Remember, this is a train car singing.

Willie Nelson

Many Americans who saw the show in London were astonished. One U.S. Air Force officer said, "I couldn't believe they were doing country music in a British show with a British cast. They had to be doing it for the Americans in the audience. Country music for a British audience?"

Yes, country music for a British audience. Evidence of just how popular country music is in Britain is the upcoming annual International Festival of Country Music at Wembley Arena, March 25-27, starring Buck Owens, Tammy Wynette and Waylon Jennings, among others. This long-standing shindig, held every Easter weekend, features a handful of America's top country stars, a heap of lesser Nashville artists and British-bred acts, a horde of vendors selling country albums and American country garb and souvenirs, and a herd of avid fans, many of whom dress

DAVID REDFERN



The Judds



Box Car Willie

as cowboys and cowgirls. In fact, almost half of the festival's tickets sell months before the lineups are announced.

Wembley's festival is merely the high point on the British country-music fan's calendar. Several smaller festivals take place throughout the summer, and country music acts, such as Box Car Willie, Billie Jo Spears, George Hamilton IV and Bill Anderson, regularly tour the country, selling out music halls and auditoriums. They are not merely American novelties, either, for their British audiences know all the tunes and titles, sometimes singing loud enough to drown out the performers.

The Nashville-to-Austin sound has struck a chord in Britain, a country with no cowboys in its history, no south-of-the-Mason-Dixon-Line pride, no 18-wheelers forming convoys. Nevertheless, it appeals to the same people in Britain as it does in America, across all age groups and classes, but primarily among middle-aged working-class folks; "the people who have lived, loved and lost, the three key words of country music," says Colin Kettle, publisher and editor of *Country Music*

JIM SILVERTHORN



Crystal Gayle

Round Up, Britain's own country-music newspaper.

Kettle's newspaper has a paid circulation of 30,000 readers and is one of three such publications in Britain, the others being *Country Music News* and *Country Music People*, yet one more gauge of country's popularity in the U.K.

Another is the proliferation of country-music clubs, not the drinking and dancing type, but social organizations sharing a hobby, with elected officers and meetings. Kettle estimates Britain has some 500 clubs, while Sonia Cameron, who hosts a weekly country-music hour on Radio Oxfordshire, says her listening area has about 102 clubs.

These clubs are active enough to hold their own concerts and dances featuring British bands. Miss Cameron, in addition to being a disc jockey and free-lance journalist, also runs an agency and has 180 country bands on her books, all making a living with

DAVID REDFERN



Johnny Cash

their playing; and there are many more agents with many more bands than she.

Obviously, country music is alive in Britain. Unfortunately for the American fan, it lives incognito. For all the proof of its popularity, country music has little to show for itself in Britain.

For instance, there is no venue devoted to country music. "There have been several attempts to put a permanent country-music venue in London, and nobody supports it," says Tony Byworth, a promoter and agent representing Ricky Skaggs, The Judds, Nancy Griffith and other American stars in Britain. The Mean Fiddler in Harlesden is the latest attempt at a country nightclub, but relies just as much on rock'n'roll acts for survival.

Britain has no radio station devoted to country music. On national radio, the genre gets just two hours a week, with

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Ricky Skaggs

Wally Whyton's "Country Club" on BBC Radio 2 Thursday evenings. Local stations provide the odd hour here and there, too. The country music that does creep into the daily radio playlists is marketed as easy listening, middle-of-the-road or "alternative music."

This causes an identity crisis for the genre. Record stores don't know where to stock what little country music they sell; some put it with pop, others with jazz, foreign, folk or new age.

"So many people like country music and don't know it's country music," says Kettle. "The overall interest is far

greater than the large record companies and the national media realize."

The major record labels are partly to blame for the "peg 'em and plug 'em" mentality that governs record releases, radio playlists and chart action. Since they are more interested in what's hip, traditional country gets no marketing support.

But the blame for country music's stuck-in-the-closet state belongs as much to the country-music community itself, which has a tendency to shoot itself in the foot, sometimes with a six-shooter holstered around the waist. The six-shooter is part of the costume worn by the most visible of fans at Britain's country-music festivals, those who dress up as cowboys and saloon girls, and for whom the music is only a supplement for their Wild-West fantasies.

JIM SILVERTHORN



Tammy Wynette

JIM SILVERTHORN



Billie Jo Spears

"It's escapism and 'Fantasy Island'," says Kettle. "They go to country music just to dress up, and the media homes in on that, the guy in the Stetson and six-shooter, instead of the artist."

Martin Satterthwaite, director of European operations for the Nashville-based Country Music Association, agrees that country music suffers a bad image in Britain. "The national-press people have tended to portray country music with straw bales, and they constantly

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Tom T. Hall

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call it country and western, emphasizing the western," he says. "These stereotypes are hard to break."

Tastes are as hard to change. The British country-music fan's preference is firmly ensconced in the traditional fare; they like the oldies, they want the musicians they know.

"The true country artists, like Kitty Wells and Billie Jo Spears, outdraw the Loretta Lynns," says Jeffrey Kruger, one of Britain's leading pop-music promoters and agents for 35 years and organizer of the Annual International Country Music Festival in Peterborough. "They



Tanya Tucker

JIM SILVERTHORN

would want Bill Anderson over the Statlers or the Oak Ridge Boys. If you offered me Alabama or Faron Young, I would take Faron Young. Tom T. Hall will outdraw Ricky Skaggs."

"The average country-music club person likes his Jim Reeves and Hank Thompson," Miss Cameron says. "They won't go forward."

This presents a dilemma for the CMA's European division, which must try to get the British record labels interested in country music for its income-generating potential. "The last thing we want to do is alienate the traditional folks," Satterthwaite says, "but they are not big record buyers. Though they complain about how the record companies don't release what they want, they don't go out and buy the product by the thousands.

"I'm not sure the traditional fans know what they want. They're afraid to try something new."

The irony is that the new breed of country music—the charge led by Ricky Skaggs and The Judds—is actually a more traditional fare than Nashville's mainstays and is a return to country's roots.



Bill Anderson

JIM SILVERTHORN

The further irony is that the new country acts have finally captured the record companies' interest. These acts—Randy Travis, Sweethearts of the Rodeo, Nancy Griffith, Lyle Lovett, Dwight Yoakam—are young; therefore, the labels see them as hip, though their music has more country accent than Dolly Parton or Glen Campbell ever sang.

Thus, country music finally got some respect, if not a major breakthrough, with the Route 88 festival in London last summer. Looking to build an audience for their new country stars, six major labels—CBS, RCA, MCA, EMI, Warner-Electra-Atlantic and Polygram—joined forces in an amazing miracle of cooperation, for a series of concerts at the Royal Albert Hall and clubs around the city.

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A British country-music social club living out a Wild-West fantasy.

Both Satterthwaite and Byworth, two of the driving forces behind Route 88, said they had hoped to take the festival around the country, but no provincial venues were interested, another example of the traditionalists' stranglehold on the market. In fact, in London, Route 88 took a licking in ticket sales, but it was the publicity that mattered most. The festival got regular press coverage, some of the stars got singles on the radio, Byworth took BBC Radio 1 to Nashville to interview the musicians ("They'd never been to Nashville before," he says), and *Q* Magazine, Britain's top music magazine, featured "Country Music's New Breed" in a cover story, an article which dwelt on the artists, not hay bales and six shooters.

Satterthwaite and Byworth both say they will do the festival again in '89, and are determined to take it around the country this time.

That is good news for the American country-music fan who wants his or her dose of the down-home sound while in Britain. There are also the major festivals to attend, led by the annual Easter weekend shindig at Wembley (ticket information available from the box office, Wembley Arena, Wembley, Middlesex; tel. 01-8034756). Kettle plans to stage the inaugural Lincolnshire International Country Music Jamboree, which he likens to a state fair, in Grantham, May 27-29. He claims it will be the largest country-music event in Britain. Meanwhile, Kruger says his International Country Music Festival is a go for '89, but probably not in Peterborough.

Outside the festivals, Kruger says that if Americans can't find their fill of country music in Britain, they simply

are not looking, and he listed two dozen country acts, including Willie Nelson, Crystal Gayle, Johnny Cash, Glen Campbell and Tammy Wynette, that

have played in London and the provinces over the past year.

Miss Cameron suggests Americans check in with a local country-music club—not all of them insist on a dress code of spurs and fringes. Kettle backs the suggestion, saying, "Americans will be surprised at the hospitality they'll get."

For information on clubs, country-music festivals, country-stars' tours and other country-music events in each region of Great Britain, the best source is *Country Music Round Up*. For subscription details, write the CMRU Publishing Company, 286/287 High Street (Upper Precinct), Lincoln LN2 1AL.

On the other hand, there is the suggestion offered by Satterthwaite of the CMA. When asked where an American servicemember can get his or her dose of country music while in Britain, Satterthwaite thought for a moment, then said, "Probably from the PX."

—ERIC MINTON

BRITISH BANDS BREAK OUT

ONE MEASURE OF A MUSIC'S popularity is the number of bands it spawns. In Britain, country music has bred perhaps a thousand.

A truer gauge is the kind of talent these bands boast. Most have more boast than talent, but a few earn honest plaudits. The question is, could any British country-music band be a hit in Nashville?

The unanimous answer among country-music critics, promoters and stars is yes—if the conditions were right. Four acts are consistently mentioned:

—The Poachers, who did indeed make the country charts in America a few years ago;

—Daniel O'Donnell, an Irish singer whose album sold 200,000 copies last year in the United Kingdom without a hit single, outselling American country acts in Britain;

—Raymond Froggatt, longtime a successful songwriter, whose hit credits range from Billie Jo Spears to Cliff Richards and who has garnered three consecutive "International Male Artist of the Year" awards from British country-music fans;

—Colorado, Scottish Highlands group, regularly chosen to back visiting American stars.

"These have an originality about them," says promoter Jeffrey Kruger. "They could make it in Nashville if they had the courage and the opportunity. The rest are copying what they hear from America."

"The failure of the British scene is that our singers are going around singing about 18-wheelers and honky-tonks, and singing with American accents," says Geordie Jacks, lead singer, guitarist and fiddler for Colorado. Although

his band originally played Top 40 covers before moving to country, Jacks cites the band's Highland background—the Celtic connection which also runs through traditional American mountain music—and their own songwriting, for Colorado's distinction among British bands.

"Our skills are not necessarily that high," he says, "but our feel for the music is right. We can qualify what we do because our music is natural. Country music is truth music, people music; you have to experience it."

Though they've recorded three of their albums in Nashville, on vinyl, Colorado lacks the polish that would put them in the upper class of American country music. But in concert, the band regularly outshines the Nashville stars they are supporting, and their stage show could even blow away Alabama's.

However, when a country band reaches the top in Britain, they hit a low ceiling and can go no further. "And it's a very poor circuit," Jacks says.

For Colorado, Froggatt or O'Donnell to burst out of the Britain circuit, they would have to have a major British record label sign them and put its full marketing muscle behind the product in Britain. Only then, might an American label take notice. But British record labels are looking only across the Atlantic for any country-music talent to push on the British public, and British acts simply don't have the weight to draw attention to themselves.

"The British scene is not lacking talent," says Colin Kettle, editor and publisher of *Country Music Round Up*. "It's lacking support, it's lacking the management. They can't get the street knowledge they need to promote them."