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## Ten Things You Didn't Know about the Origins of Country Music

by Richard A. Peterson, author of Creating Country Music

1. **Atlanta**, rather than Nashville, should have become "Music City, U.S.A." Not only was there was more local talent in Atlanta, but more importantly, in the mid-1920s the five elements that together made commercial country music possible: radio, record making, live touring, song writing, and song publishing, all came together in Atlanta. At the center of this enterprise was Polk Brockman and his first find, Fiddlin' John Carson. For the whole story see Chapter 2 of *Creating Country Music*.
2. **Jimmie Rodgers**, the "Father of Country Music," didn't think he was the father of anything but three daughters. When "discovered" by Ralph Peer of RCA he was just trying to be a snappy southern vaudeville act. In a letter to his wife, Carrie, he said derisively of the music Peer wanted him to perform: "If I can't get 'em in town, we'll go to the woods." In the same year—1927—Peer also "discovered" the Carter Family. For more details on the creation of these "authentic" country artists, see Chapter 3.
3. **Henry Ford**, the auto maker, put more money into promoting country music in the 1920s than anyone else. Ford was frightened by what he saw as the urban decadence of couples jazz dancing. In response he organized fiddling contests and promoted square dances across the country to encourage what he saw as the older, more wholesome forms of entertainment. For more on this story and on Ford's links to fascism, see Chapter 4.
4. **How did "western" get linked to "country"?** Credit (or blame) Hollywood. Luckily, Hollywood didn't call the tune, just the dress code. Gene Autry and other Western-cowboy-outfitted artists were much more popular in B films of the 1930s and 1940s than were their Southern-hillbilly-styled counterparts like Roy Acuff. So, emerging honky-tonk artists like Patsy Montana, Ernest Tubb, Hank Snow, Rex Griffin, and Webb Pierce donned cowboy-styled outfits to sing their hillbilly songs of life's travails. Increasingly backed by hot, electrified instruments, they shaped the sound, lyric, and look that has been at the core of country music ever since. It takes three chapters—5, 6, and 10—to tell the story of this evolution. Along the way, you'll learn about John Wayne's short career as a singing cowboy.
5. Much of country music of the 1920s was more **rowdy and bawdy** than that of the 1930s. The B side of the very first country music record, by Fiddlin' John Carson, had the barnyard double entendre lyric "The Old Hen Cackled, and the Rooster's Going to Crow." The Light Crust Doughboys' recording "Pussy, Pussy, Pussy" was one of many bawdy songs to follow. Country music was cleaned up in the 1930s as radio became the major medium for promoting country music performers. Advertisers such as Crazy Water Crystals

insisted on sanitized lyrics, while impresario George Hay, creator of the Grand Ole Opry, fostered an image of clean family entertainment. Radio artists eagerly embraced this positive, folksy image so they could sell products and advance their careers. Not incidentally, the radio medium was a safe haven in which women could develop their voices. For more details on why duet groups reached their highest popularity during the reign of radio, see Chapter 7 and 8.

6. That's right, **Crazy Water Crystals**, a patent medicine—a laxative actually—distilled from the waters of Mineral Wells, Texas. The company sponsored more country music artists on the radio in the mid-1930s than any of the now better-remembered advertisers such as Burris Mills, Bull Durham, and Carter's Little Liver Pills. Not content simply to sponsor airtime, the company formed a barn-dance show of its own, and backed a number of individual groups who agreed to incorporate "crazy" into their band name. The "crazy" appellation became so popular that one enterprising young showman without sponsorship, Roy Acuff, named his group the "Crazy Tennesseans" in hopes of greater recognition. More about the influence of country music's sponsors can be found in Chapter 8.
7. It's not true that country music has gone from more down-home to more cosmopolitan. Chapter 9 shows how the hard-edged Roy Acuff displaced the slick, smooth-sounding, crooning Vagabonds as the hit act on the Grand Ole Opry. The chapter includes a description of the characteristics of these two parallel traditions in country music: **hard-core and soft-shell**. It turns out that the style of Vince Gill and Iris Dement has roots as deep as the style of Loretta Lynn and George Strait.
8. What's behind **the legend of Hank Williams**? His fans didn't know that Hank was a womanizing alcoholic, at least not during his lifetime. Nor was he the first of the Rockabilies cut off in his prime, as his son Hank Jr. and others now like to say. Hank's few big-beat recordings were made early in his career, and though he did do the things that are talked of and more, the facts were carefully kept from the public. Near the end of his brief career he was dropped from the Grand Ole Opry cast for being too far gone to keep up the clean-cut facade required by even the biggest star of the Opry. Also, Hank did not write most of the songs with which he is credited. He outlined the basic stories and provided the catchy phrases, but almost all of the songs were finished by his brilliant song writing publisher, Fred Rose. To learn why Williams, nonetheless, deserves his iconic status in country music, read Chapter 11.
9. **Why is country music called "country"?** Joe McCarthy, the anti-Communist witch-hunting Senator from Wisconsin, had a lot to do with it. From the late 1940s country had been a musical genre in search of a label—something less degrading than "hillbilly." Everything from "old-time" to "oat tuncs" was tried out, but "folk" gained currency with the unexpected success of the Weavers, whose hits included "Goodnight Irene" and "On Top of Old Smoky." Even Hank Williams called himself a folk singer. Then came the 1952 Senate hearings, where McCarthy demanded that the Weavers' lead singer, Pete Seeger, testify about his "Communist leanings." The industry dropped "folk" like a hot rock and "country and western" or simply "country" came into wide use. For the further story of the

consolidation of the country music industry around Nashville, see Chapter 12.

10. **What is authentic country music?** Authenticity in performance has a completely different meaning than authenticity with reference to objects. Authenticating a document or work of art involves finding whether it is the original object. However, if you are an authentic performer, let's say, and I copy your look, lyric, or style, I am to that degree imitating and not authentic. Thus what is taken to be authentic is continually changing. Will country music survive the millennium? Is authentic country music fading with the passing of the country artists born into Southern rural poverty during the Great Depression years: Loretta Lynn, George Jones, Johnny Cash, and Merle Haggard? Could be, but not necessarily. Authenticity is a renewable resource, and the final chapter of *Creating Country Music* outlines the conditions for country music's survival and growth in the twenty-first century.



If you knew some, but not all, of the foregoing ten facts about the creation of country music, you're the perfect reader for *Creating Country Music*. If you knew all ten already, you're the perfect co-author for the second edition! In either case, the author of *Creating Country Music*, Richard A. Peterson, would be pleased to hear from you. You can send email to him at: [petersra@ctr.vax.vanderbilt.edu](mailto:petersra@ctr.vax.vanderbilt.edu).

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