

Highlights of a love-hate affair:

During the upward climb on the 5-hour hike around Diez Vistas 800 meters above Buntzen Lake, Port Moody, B.C., I reflected on my tangled relationship with the country western music of the '50s-'60s:



The soundtrack of my early childhood was largely provided by a black kitchen radio perpetually tuned to the nearest signal. It was from a private station in Fredericton, New Brunswick—the mainstay programming of which was religious services and country music.

Well before there was language to shape thoughts: the screech of fiddles and nasal twangs seemed to evoke the starkness of the local landscape and the bitterness of its winters. While that was the instrumentation labelled country *western*—the local variety featured fiddles and clarinets jerkily playing jigs, hornpipes and reels. That Canadian Maritime strain struck to the heart a particularly nauseous gloom.

Contrasting with that visceral response to the native music—was a fascination with the American ‘story songs’ of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. While tragic songs such as Johnny Horton’s ‘*Springtime in Alaska*’ were labelled ‘country’, they featured in that era on the hit parades of both pop and of country. The themes of illicit love, betrayal and death—would hardly seem the preoccupation of childhood—but the tragic essence of Lefty Frizzell’s ‘*Long Black Veil*’ particularly pierced my 8-year-old heart.



I memorized the lyrics of several story songs and was even urged by my mother to sing them for relatives. Once in the farm kitchen of her girlhood homestead in the St. John River Valley, I received whistling applause for my rendition of Marty Robbins’ classic, ‘*El Paso*’. Yet a week later in the antiseptic living room of paternal grandparents, my performance of the same was met by awkward silence. Their Presbyterian sensibilities were no doubt scandalized by the spectacle of a child chirping:

“*It’s been so long since I’ve seen my young maiden— my love is stronger than my fear of death... ”*

However embarrassed, I was struck that the response to story songs must have something to do with the smell of the house wherein they are heard...



The first country western records I recall listening to were 45s from the metal rack under the brown record player at the foot of the sofa in the mothball-suffused parlour of my maternal aunt B.'s house. They were mostly Johnny Cash story songs, including '*Johnny Yuma*', '*Don't Take your Guns to Town*', and '*the Ballad of Ira Hayes*'.

As much as my little cousins and I loved to watch them spin, we had to be wary when the parlour door was closed, and the blinds drawn. That was when Uncle D. was stretched on the green chesterfield sleeping off a bender.

For his dark features, gaunt frame and love of rum—Uncle D.'s nickname was 'Blackjack'. A Royal Navy vet and boilermaker, he had a reputation as a mean drunk. Nonetheless, he was far and away my favourite uncle—especially when he played his guitar. He kept his scratched-up flattop along with a set of harmonicas in the opposite corner from the record player. When alone behind the closed parlour door, I often defied the warning that a snapping string could put out an eye. Having just one hand—getting blinded was the last thing I needed—or so I was told. Still, the vibrating sound of open strings was irresistibly hypnotic...

When Uncle D. was in his jollier moods, he would perform—a few times for me alone. He sang country songs in a cowboy drawl alternating voice with notes from his harmonica positioned on a neck-holder. He could sing most of the songs in his 45s collection in a style that in recollection, was a pastiche of Jimmy Rogers, Hank Williams and Johnny Cash. Sometimes he would let me strum while he chorded. He would usually end his sessions with a mildly bawdy song, spontaneously composed, with references to my cousins and me. Even when my aunt came to the doorway and called him a crazy fool, I had no doubt that Uncle D. had the rarest of gifts.

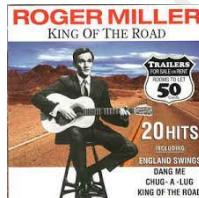


Against the enchantment of the guitars of Uncle D. and Johnny Cash, was the screech of Don Messer's fiddle. Don was a local treasure—hailing from the hamlet of Tweedside, New Brunswick, just a few miles through the fen from my native village. A couple of teenage buddies, no fans themselves of stodgy music, bore their uncle Don's surname with pride. From depression-era radio to CBC TV, Messer's old-timey music was beloved by older labouring folk across the Dominion. Imitators of the band style of Don Messer and his Islanders provided a staple of programming for the radio station to which the kitchen radio was permanently locked in.



Monday nights on CBC TV, the single channel received until the late '60s, featured 'Don Messer's Jubilee'. Every Monday at precisely 7:00 PM, the heart sank in the opening notes of the show's signature tune: '*Goin' to the Barn Dance Tonight*'. Don's fiddling rattled like a chain saw. Long before learning that his down-east musical style was adapted from the fiddling in the New Brunswick lumber camps of old—I remember connecting Don Messer's fiddle to the reek of spruce pitch, singed wool and rank sweat. As for the other regular performers on the *Jubilee*: what would be more uncool than the string ties and flouncy dresses of the Buchta square dancers? Who, with any pulse, could be comforted by the duet of the double-chinned Marge and Charlie warbling '*How Great Thou Art*'?

Still, in the early-'70s when the show was canned by the CBC, I had some patronizing empathy for the outcry. While hardly rising to a *cause celebre*, the cancellation vaguely echoed the grievances of the presumed yahoos of the backwaters against the elitist CBC executives in the Toronto metropole. Yet even with the fledgling political sympathies, Don's fiddle still grated the ear.



In the adolescent prejudice that country western was the music of greasers, farmers and Pentecostals, I loathed it. Impossible though it was to filter the stream of TV, radio and jukeboxes—to even be tempted by a Nashville tune was to risk the danger of being drawn in—even trapped—by the sensibilities of its primary audience.

There was particular unease in 'cross-over' pop/country music. Even the Beatles released '*Act Naturally*', first recorded by the slick-haired Buck Owens and the Buckaroos. One became as susceptible to earworms like Glen Campbell's '*Wichita Lineman*' or Tom Jones' '*Green, Green, Grass of home*', as to seasonal colds and flus.

Then there were the pop country artists like Roger Miller, with witty ditties like "Chug-a-lug" and 'Dang Me' ("Ya oughta take a rope and hang me!"). Yet it was the finger-snapping '*King of the Road*', describing the woes of a guy flat out of luck, that was unforgettable for the line:

'...Third boxcar, midnight train—destination Bangor, Maine...'

Upon first catching this jokey reference to the Christmas shopping mecca of childhood, I was shocked. Considering all the American cities from Abilene to Wichita celebrated in country songs—was that the kind of attention that Bangor deserved? Further I wondered—if a city in

Maine was mocked as a hobo's end of the road, how would Roger Miller describe a Canadian village 2 hours deeper into the north woods? While others might have been privately offended, I simply felt even more itchy in my shoes...



In the midst of late 60s' psychedelia, there came an unexpected wallop of emotional dissonance in the reappearance of Bob Dylan after a 3-year absence, with the album '*Nashville Skyline*'. Along with many who adored "*Like a Rolling Stone*" I remember first gritting teeth in the steel guitar and Bob's nasalized voice. The opening track was a new version of '*Girl from the North Country*' performed with Johnny Cash. All resistance gave way to its wistful beauty.

Watching Bob Dylan performing the same duet with Johnny soon thereafter on the *Johnny Cash Show*, was a transformative moment. Even a long-haired kid of the '60s could admire Johnny Cash. His integrity was unique. He did not have to change his music or his hairstyle (as many performers did) to pander to the '60s music scene. Some of his songs, like those of folkies, brought attention to injustice and to the downtrodden. But it still took the blessing of Bob Dylan to endear him again to those who still remembered the lyrics of "*The Ballad of Ira Hayes*." Thereafter '*Live at Folsom Prison*' could be openly stacked along with Dylan's '*Blonde on Blonde*' or even with Hendrix's '*Are you Experienced?*'. Meanwhile, along with my long-haired cohort, I had license to regularly watch the *Johnny Cash Show*.

In that same juncture, '60s bands like the Byrds and the Grateful Dead were recording country-flavoured albums furthering the commonality of country/folk roots. Steel guitars, banjo and dobros no longer evinced queasiness—at least not when played by long-haired musicians.

Like fellow sheep of my generation, I also took cues from the soundtracks of Hollywood movies. '*The Last Picture Show*' piqued interest in Hank Williams just as '*Deliverance*' bestowed a momentary shine on banjo picking...

Still, though my late adolescence I was no less loath to follow the Nashville charts. How could one be moved by the cheesy sentimentalism of sequin-suited crackers any more than by their big-haired female counterparts? Theirs was the culture of bibles, guns and American jingoism—or so it was presumed. The very names of many country artists—Dolly Parton, Ferlin Husky, Johnny Paycheck—seemed risible to a smart-assed college boy. Would a rock musician stick by a handle like Conrad Twitty?



Yet a humbling was to come. I was in my early 20s, living across the continent from my former province and still in recovery from a sweetheart breakup a year before. In one of my aimless Saturday night walks through the seedy downtown, I stepped from the cold into a pub where wailing from the jukebox, was the voice of George Jones:

'I wonder who'll turn out the light in your world tonight? Whose shoulder will your head be restin' on?'

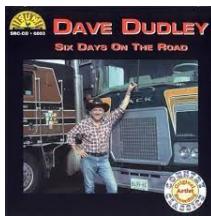
For the first time, the sentiment was anything but mawkish. The hurting was *real*— and it mirrored my own:

'Has someone found the secret that I couldn't find?'

In my notepad I wrote down: '*Who'll turn out the lights in your world tonight*'? along with lines from the 'Song of Solomon', I'd read earlier the same evening:

'Love is as strong as death— and jealousy as cruel as the grave...'

Even if George Jones, AKA 'ole Possum', still fit the cracker stereotype— his voice never failed thereafter to put its hook in me...



A couple of years later, teaching in a boarding school posting in northern Nigeria, I experienced another country music epiphany. One lonely night in tiring of BBC World Service talking heads, I was twisting around the dial of my shortwave when from amid the wavering cacaphony of southern Europe and North Africa there came the crackle of a country guitar:

'I got my diesel wound up and she's runnin' like a never before...'

After the fade out of '*Six Days on the Road*', Dave Dudley's classic tribute to long haul truckers, a DJ with a twangy voice identified his station location as: "Dubai, United Arab Emirates."

He then played '*Detroit City*', by Bobby Bare. What has been previously heard as background noise, was for first time a heartrending lament of the lonely village migrant in the heartless city ('*By day I make the cars and by night I make the bars...*')

Yet what really moistened the eyes that night was hearing again Lefty Frizzell's '*Long Black Veil*', the story song that haunted in childhood. Do even the most masterfully written short stories, I marveled, match the terseness by which a tragedy is so evoked in just 3 minutes?

For months thereafter, often straining against a weak signal, I tuned in to that beacon of country nostalgia apparently beamed to American oil workers in the Gulf. Every session brought a humbling surprise if not a revelation. How could I have known that Merle Haggard, author of the

hippie-baiting, ‘*Okie from Muskogee*’, also composed poignant ballads like ‘*I’m a lonesome Fugitive*’? (I soon added it, along with ‘*Sing me back home*’, to my harmonica repertoire).



Along with popular Nashville music, the DJ in Dubai featured country folk. Among his delightful offerings was the original ‘*Battle of New Orleans*’ composed by Jimmy Driftwood, who (it was noted) was both a musician and a history teacher hailing from the Ozarks. The popular Johnny Horton cover I’d memorized in childhood paled in comparison to the longer and juicier Driftwood version.

That anonymous cracker DJ in Dubai also awakened a new appreciation of old timey bluegrass. On that wavering signal across the Sahara—the picking, plucking and lightning-fast bowing that seemed to encapsulate mid-winter dreariness a decade and a half before—was transformed into something deliriously joyful.

Although I certainly had known of Flatts and Scruggs (if only from ‘*Beverly Hillbillies*’ and ‘*Bonnie and Clyde*’) my introduction to Bill Monroe, Doc Watson, Ralph Stanley and a host of other masters of the genre, probably had my Hausa neighbours alarmed by the table thumping hollers.

For the first time, I understood that bluegrass truly was hillbilly soul music. What could be more soulful than the smell of honeysuckle and sour mash whiskey along with sinful fornication on the bank of the baptizin’ creek? In the midst of such musical delirium I still wondered just how much of the broader culture I might have sopped up had ‘*Foggy Mountain Breakdown*’ or ‘*Wildwood Flower*’ country been my own native territory. Along with being an uncritical lover of country music, might I have become a gun-loving Pentecostal?

In the shudder accompanying that question, I understood that even in opening to country music, I was not cuddling up to its predominant redneck culture. The core dispositions of that culture were no less reflected in Roy Acuff’s mocking of New Deal social security (‘*the old age pension cheque*’) than in Johnny Cash’s compassion for “drunken Ira Hayes.” There would be no surprise in later hearing that Nova Scotia-born Hank Snow campaigned for Alabama segregationist George Wallace. So it was that in mid-20s, I was able to embrace the music while remaining very wary of much of its underlying ‘values’.

At the same time, I could not deny an intractable prejudice against female country artists. From Kitty Wells (‘*It wasn’t God who made Honky Tonk Angels*’) to Tammy Wynette (“*Stand by your Man*”), the women of country too often reminded me of the big-haired girls of my native village. Even the smart ones were still eager to reform the ducktail-haired bad boys and then make babies with them. Tammy’s threat to go bad herself (‘*Your good girl’s gonna go bad*’) was a familiar story of a cute village girl throwing herself from one abusive asshole to another...

Most revealingly in those nights in the Sahel, I realized that I could only appreciate country music from a *distance*. It was only in absence of the smothering threat of its primary audience that country music could be enjoyed.

This realization was borne out again more than a decade after my return from Africa. Once on a road trip to the interior of British Columbia, I took along a cassette of Hank Williams. Yet in playing the tape while passing through farmland and past shacks fronted by old cars, an ancient dreariness suddenly took hold. I had to eject it. Only back in the Vancouver suburbs could I croon along with '*I'm so lonesome I could Cry*'...



The final resistance to country music to give way was to old-timey white gospel.

It is ironic, is course, that whites in the American south so heavily ‘borrowed’ from African musical forms while ruthlessly enforcing segregation, even in churches. However averse to the message—it is hard to resist an infectiously soulful black gospel number like '*O Happy Day*', which even made the pop charts in the late ‘60s. As a copied form, even the rollicking music of white Pentecostal churches could only be feeble in comparative soulfulness.

Regarding the syrupy gospel tracks that seemed to be obligatory on country albums, my inclination was to skip over them or turn down the volume. Even the voice of Johnny Cash beckoning to '*Come to the church in the wildwood*' almost threatened a gag reflex.

Yet the gospel songs of the legendary Hank Williams were irresistible. The joy of a sinner’s redemption in '*I saw the Light*' seemed all the more fragile for its desperation. Rather than fawning to a namby-pamby Jesus, Hank’s gospel seemed to be more haunted by back-sliding temptation ('*Lost Highway*') and by a choking fear of death ('*Angel of Death*'):

*Can you truthfully say, with your dying breath
That you're ready to meet, the Angel of death?*



I’d long known about bluegrass gospel, but it wasn’t until early middle age that I was curious enough to borrow from the local library a collection of the renowned Stanley Brothers. I was immediately struck by harmonies that seemed more akin to black gospel than sugary white ‘praise music’.

Even the expressions of childlike belief, such as in '*I'll fly away*', seemed to be driven by a deeper kenning of the tragedy and dread:

*'When the shadows of this life have gone
Like a bird from these prison walls—I'll fly away'*

It was hillbilly faith rattled by doubt that most riveted. In ‘*Rank Strangers*’ a dream of a return to his childhood village, Ralph Stanley’s tenor pierced like a snake-handling yelp echoing through the mountain hollow:

*'Everybody I met seemed to be a rank stranger
no mother or dad, no friend did I see
They knew not my name and I knew not their faces
I found they were all rank strangers to me'*

Most evocative of all in that collection was ‘*O Death*’. Ralph Stanley’s old man’s voice, shivering and rasping—naked of any instrumental accompaniment—cut to the core:

*'What is this that I can't see/ with ice cold hands taking hold of me
Whooooah death/ won't you spare me over 'til another year?'*

The desperate pleading and bargaining in the grip of the ultimate fear—is anything but an expression of an uplifting faith. It has been nearly 3 decades since I first heard his dirge, but in every subsequent listening—Brother Ralph’s plea before the Reaper has ever more deeply chilled...



Through all the years of gradually coming to appreciate all manner of ‘roots’ music—the question has remained: why was I so viscerally resistant to a rare musical form sprung of my native soil? If I could grow to appreciate Appalachian bluegrass and even some American gospel: why couldn’t I appreciate ‘down east’ fiddling?

More recently, I downloaded Don Messer fiddle tunes—including ‘*Maple Sugar*’ and ‘*Red Wing*’ . The hope was that the distance of a half-century might allow some yielding to what might have been missed. I was particularly curious to hear again ‘*St. Anne’s Reel*’ . I recalled playing that cheery tune on my harmonica as a college boy in Fredericton, the town which was established by the British after they razed Ste. Anne’s, the Acadian village for which the reel was named. Yet in the opening flourish, I wondered whether it was the Islanders’ tinny ensemble of clarinet, bass fiddle and brushed drums—or just the fiddling—that stirred an ancient drear...

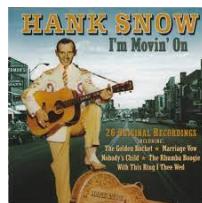
As much as I had hoped otherwise, I could not avoid contrasting the reediness of Don’s fiddle with the depth and richness of bluegrass fiddling. Just as it is so often claimed—the bluegrass style evolved from Scotch-Irish fiddle music merging with Spanish guitar and African banjo. Perhaps the northeast North American fiddling style, despite having the same European origins, was stunted by its isolation in a thin glacier-scraped soil...

But then—who to hell was I to make such speculations? My acquaintance with the entire genre was fossilized before the mid-1970s. I pay no attention to contemporary American country artists—assuming that the hillbilly sequins have largely given way to American flags—and attendant jingoism...

I could well be missing some great music—especially of local country artists. I have been faintly interested in hearing more of the acclaimed fiddling of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, but am dissuaded by the patronizing CBC radio airing of it. Such is the captivity to the prejudices of old ears!

Maybe my aversion to certain musical forms is like having allergies that will never be outgrown. I sometimes think of the childhood allergy to horsehair that so often spoiled visits to my grandfather's farm. Fortunately, against that, is the memory of the smiles in the farm kitchen in the afternoon when I sang through every verse of the ballad, 'El Paso'...

At Punto Este, I crouched down before the panorama of Buntzen Lake stretching far below. Mopping sweat from brow, I realized that with 10 lookouts and much scrambling still to come—like Hank Snow, I had to 'keep movin' on'...



-2011, August