Singing Cowboys and Musical Podcasters: Defining Country Music Through Public History

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Abstract

"Grrrr. . .Nudie Suit" (2006) by Flicker User Romana Klee ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License (CC BY-SA 2.0) In advance of International Podcast Day on 30 September, Sounding Out! finishes a series of posts exploring different facets of the audio art of the podcast, which we have been putting into those earbuds since 2011.

Keywords

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In *advance* of International Podcast Day on 30 September, *Sounding Out!* finishes a series of posts exploring different facets of the audio art of the podcast, which we have been putting into those earbuds since 2011. Past posts have examined Gimlet Media's Fiction Podcast *Homecoming*, Amanda Lund's *The Complete Woman?* Podcast Series, and how podcasts position listeners as "stoic." Today's entry examines how country music podcasts do–or do not–consider the sound of the music itself in their episodes. **Enjoy! –JS**

If you're a country music fan, you might be aware of the genre's central contradiction: for all the references to classic, traditional, "real" country music, most of this music has not been preserved. The genre's history is disappearing. Many of country music's best recordings will never make it to

digital archives or streaming services, save for a few generous YouTubers who upload their personal record collections for public enjoyment. Just try to find Stoney Edwards' 1971 classic *Down Home in the Country* or Patti Page's 1951 collection *Folk Song Favorites* on the streaming platform of your choice. These albums didn't even make it to CD.

Books about country music history are even more rare, and some of the most insightful publications are long out of print. If you're lucky enough to score a copy of Philip Self's *Guitar Pull: Conversations with Country Music's Legendary Songwriters*, for instance, the book will set you back over $70. A search of the nation's university libraries reveals just four copies available in the entire United Sates.

Within the academic world, though, a new generation of scholars is bringing country history to the forefront, all while complicating the inaccurate racialized mythos perpetuated by the industry. Among other exciting work, Amanda Marie Martinez recently published on the intersection of punk and country in Reagan-era Southern California, and Francesca Royster has an innovative piece of the power of country artist Valerie June (and dropping new book in October 2022 called *Black Country Music*: Listening for Revolutions!) . The recent essay collection *The Honky Tonk on the Left* brings together a diverse cast of professors to challenge the received wisdom that the genre is solely home to political conservatism.



Beyond traditional academic channels, podcasting offers a new way of studying music history. The medium is both popular with the general public and tailor-made for sonic analysis. One of the best examples comes from *Cocaine and Rhinestones*, a podcast about the history of twentieth century country music. Hosted by Tyler Mahan Coe, the show examines forgotten or misunderstood country history while placing this history within the structural contexts of gender, race and class. Episode 2 of Season 1 breaks down country radio's sexist gatekeeping, for example. Episode 7 of the first season covers Linda Martell, the first black woman to perform on the Grand Ole Opry, along with the racist label head who kick started her career. In Episode 3 of Season 2, Coe bluntly explains how the "sounds we associate with country music came from poor people working out techniques to produce art on cheap, low quality, often damaged, sometimes straight-up broken instruments."

The obvious advantage of podcasting as a medium for telling music history is that you can listen to a given song as it's being discussed. Traditionally, a music fan had to read a book or article, then go track down whatever recordings were discussed. Prior to the internet, this could easily be a multi-year endeavor of parsing through record stores, flea markets and garage sales. Now a fan can search for a song right after they read about it, and with a podcast like *Cocaine and Rhinestones* that research is already done.

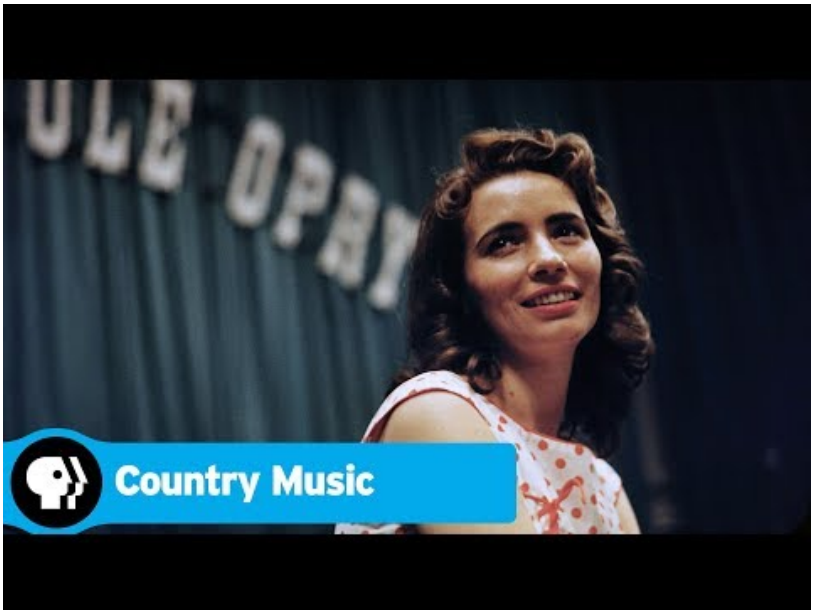
In his 2014 *SO!* piece, "DIY Histories: Podcasting the Past", Andrew Salvati argues that "podcasting can help us conceptualize an alternate cultural model of history – one that invites reconsideration of what counts as historical knowledge and interpretation, and about who is empowered to construct and access historical discourse." While this DIY approach does not overturn elite control over podcasting, it opens space for history as an oral tradition, one which is more intimate and more empowering to listeners than, say, a university lecture or a high-budget, corporately sponsored program. *Cocaine and Rhinestones* is as DIY as a podcast can be; Coe writes, records and edits every episode himself.

The show's power is most evident when compared to other recent attempts to bring country music history to a general audience. These popular histories tend to avoid critical analysis of the genre, repeating official narratives without scrutinizing how these narratives became official in the first place.



Guitar against Marty Robbins Nudie suit
North Hollywood, California, USA, 1982,
Image by Flickr User Bill Vriesma, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

One example is Ken Burns's PBS series *Country Music* (2019). Working with some of the biggest stars in the business, the documentary is more or less a retelling of long-known stories. Despite its $30 million budget, the series doesn't manage to break new ground, all while smoothing over more complicated portraits for the sake of narrative ease.



https://youtu.be/MVOZl671ssY

The documentary's most glaring failure is its treatment of race. As Kimberly Mack observes in her article "She's A Country Girl All Right," the first episode focuses "exclusively on the black and white origins of country, instead of the racism that obscured this shared history." Even though the documentary interviews Rhiannon Giddens, an acclaimed musician and expert on the racist obfuscation of country music's black roots, the documentary employs selective editing and voice-over narration to avoid confronting how these black roots continue to be ignored. Acknowledging the importance of figures such as DeFord Bailey, for example, the first person to perform on the Grand Ole Opry and the first musician to ever record in Nashville, is important, but a simple acknowledgment does not explain how the contributions of such a crucial figure are suppressed through an inaccurate racialized conception of the genre's history.



In the world of podcasting, Malcom Gladwell's *Revisionist History* offers a disappointing rehash of country's manufactured white southern roots. The episode "The King of Tears" (Season 2, Episode 6) seeks to reveal the secret behind country's embrace of sad songwriting, but Gladwell ultimately fortifies an already whitewashed history.

Unlike Ken Burns, Gladwell does not approach country from within the industry. His episode is just one in a series of other, non-musical episodes. Like Ken Burns, though, Gladwell uses selectively edited interviews and voice-over narration to shoehorn a simplistic analysis of country music. Worse still, Gladwell doesn't even acknowledge the genre's multiracial origins. The episode presents a two-part theory. First, country music songwriting focuses on sad, autobiographically specific stories. Second, the only reason this sadness is communicable is because country music's writers, performers and listeners are all part of the same social group. "It's white, southern Protestants all the way down the line," he says while discussing a list of critically acclaimed country performers.



https://youtu.be/KHgOuz899-o

The show is well edited and funded through corporate sponsorships. The podcast hops between Gladwell in the studio, on-sight interviews, and lush music clips. There is little discussion of the

actual music, however. We hear next to nothing about instrumentation, production decisions or even singing style. When Gladwell wants explain why a particular song is sad, he just plays the song and talks over the recording. Take his analysis of "Golden Ring," a 1976 duet from Tammy Wynette and George Jones. Gladwell introduces it as "a weeper," but offers no explanation as to how the song conveys sadness.

A clip of the song starts playing at the 8:17 mark of the episode. The song fades but keeps playing in the background as Gladwell butts in to summarize the plot. He gives an anecdote from the songwriter, then the podcast cuts to an interview with the songwriter. The music stops while the songwriter speaks about a specific lyric, then comes back at full volume so the listener can hear the lyric in the final recording. We then go back to the interview sans music before hearing the final phrase of the song at full volume.



https://youtu.be/Q9KniULwvjE

The transitions are smooth, and cutting between three sources of audio keeps the listener's attention. Only later does the listener realize that very little was actually said about the song. In total, the section is just under a minute and a half, and barely thirty seconds is devoted to listening to the song. All we know is that it deals with divorce. We have no context for the recording and no explanation of why the song is uniquely sad.

Cocaine and Rhinestones offers the inverse––lower production quality with richer analysis. Compared to Coe's better-funded peers, the show's audio quality is sparse, especially in the first season. 128kps files in mono can only do so much sonic justice. Such limitations never hinder the historical message, though, and they might even enhance it. *Cocaine and Rhinestones* does not build a world with sweeping soundscapes and audio effects. It is Coe in his basement, more or less monologuing. There are no interviews. Music clips and the occasional radio or television broadcast are the only other thing you hear aside from Coe's voice. For some, his voice takes getting used to, namely in the first few episodes of the series. You can hear Coe try to figure out how to talk within the context of a one-man show. His own family apparently chided him for the

awkward initial performance, but he quickly found his groove, and by the mid-point of the first season he sounds clear and comfortable.

Coe was able to upgrade to stereo for the second season, allowing for more detailed sonic analysis. Just look at Episode 14 of Season 2, where Coe walks us through the writing and recording of George Jones' 1970 hit "A Good Year for the Roses." His analysis starts around the 1:23:28 mark.

> *R028/PH14 – DIVORCE/DEATH: HE STOPPED LOVING HER TODAY, THE GRAND TOUR & A GOOD YEAR FOR THE ROSES*

As Coe explains, the record "opens with a rhythm section panned to the right and, in the left channel, a mysterious low-end swell, like a heavy dirigible lifting into flight, probably provided by a pedal steel player running their signal through a Jordan Boss Tone unit and a tape delay to mimic a cello." Coe cuts out so we can hear the effect by itself. He then goes on to describe how those production choices pair with the lyrics to create one of the saddest recordings in Jones's discography.

Whenever he discusses a moment in the song, he lets it play without voice-over. The transition between Coe's voice and the song is less smooth than the transitions we hear in Gladwell's podcast, but the comparatively abrupt cuts allow the listener to give their full attention to Coe, then to the song. By the end of the analysis, which runs significantly longer than Gladwell's discussion of "Golden Ring," we've listened to a combined minute and thirty seconds of "A Good Year for the Roses." The setup takes longer, the observations are more detailed, and that patience lets the listener appreciate the devastating impact of specific artistic decisions.



Tammy Wynette and George Jones, Still by SO!

While *Cocaine and Rhinestones* tackles everything from minute production choices to centuries-long historical arcs, the format of the show is simple. The first season covers a different artist every episode, while the second season is devoted to the life of George Jones. Episodes typically start with a historical anecdote––this could be the origin of the word ballad or the history of drag––then Coe details a given artist's life, showing where they came from, what they contributed to the genre, and how their work is embedded within larger historical structures. Coe displays an impressive command of a range of topics, not just related to music but to a variety of historical subjects.

This attention to detail is a testament to Coe's ability to not only listen but to help others listen with him. Even when episodes cross the two-hour mark, the main takeaway is that you have only scratched the surface. Sources are discussed in the show's unique closing section, known as the Liner Notes. Coe explains why he chose to tell one story but not another, how a given book is useful (or useless) in relation to other books, and sometimes he will include asides that would have disrupted the episode's main narrative. This is my favorite part of the show. It's one of the best examples of annotated citation in any discipline (see season 2's library here).

By openly discussing sources, not just sharing the books he read but detailing why, for example, a commonly cited source is not as accurate as previously assumed, Coe takes the extra step that big budget country histories won't take. He shines a light on a suppressed history *and* explains how that history was suppressed in the first place. *Cocaine and Rhinestones* doesn't just cherry pick a few examples to make a point––the show offers a patient, detailed analysis of how we came to understand what we now think of as country music and how the genre can be understood in new ways.

The second season recently ended, and a third is in the works.

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Andrew Clark *is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he studied physics and French. His undergraduate thesis, "Time, Space, and Capital: Walter Benjamin in Apollinaire's 'Zone' and René Clair's Paris qui dort," examined utopian imagery in early twentieth century Paris. He currently lives in Cincinnati, OH and works at a local brewery. You can contact him at andrewclark.me.*

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