

Guitars, Steinbeck and Hillbilly Music

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I took the road less traveled as I often do when I am in that neck of the woods, exiting westbound I-40 near Ash Fork, AZ in favor of a nostalgic journey on old Route 66 – the “Mother Road” as John Steinbeck called it in his novel, “The Grapes of Wrath”. My favorite vantage point for viewing Route 66 is the saddle of my trusty Harley-Davidson, but the comforts of the Dodge Magnum had their advantages that chilly October day. A Buck Owens song came on the stereo and life was good.

Within a minute or two, the nail biting traffic and eighteen wheelers on I-40 had disappeared behind the rolling hills. I was the only car on the two lane and nostalgic visions of other travelers from other times came easily. I recalled a passage from “The Grapes of Wrath” (perhaps triggered by the fact that I was grossly overcharged for gas in Williams) describing the tribulations of traveling the Mother Road during the dustbowl migration of the 1930s – making a fan belt out of a piece of rope, trying to keep tires on the truck, abandoning vehicles beyond repair and being exploited by the businesses along Route 66.

Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” chronicled the journey of the fictional Joad family from their farm in dust bowl Oklahoma to hope of a better life in California. The dust bowl migration was the largest mass exodus in American history as approximately 200,000 people fled dust, drought and their dying farms in Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska etc in the hope of finding work in the farm country of California. They were broke, poor and in vehicles barely fit to travel as they slowly made their way along Route 66. The migrants were not welcomed in California and regardless of where they came from, were given the disparaging label of “Okie”. Life in the labor camps was abject poverty and back breaking work with Okie families including the children laboring in the fields or orchards from dawn to dusk just to survive.

The guitar solo in the Buck Owens song disrupted my reverie. Even if I had not heard it a hundred times I would have recognized the playing of Don Rich, Buck’s lead guitarist, and the sound of Don’s Fender Telecaster guitar. The “Tele” brings to mind something my Father once told me about rattlesnakes. “You may hear something that sounds like a rattlesnake but if you have ever heard a real rattlesnake, the next time you hear one, you KNOW it is a rattlesnake.” So it is with the Tele - along with the fact that as a working musician, my Telecaster has been my go-to guitar for the past forty years. I know exactly what a Tele sounds like – rattlesnakes too, for that matter.

Poverty and hard times are fertile ground for music that hangs on our heartstrings. Steinbeck described a scene in an Okie labor camp with everyone getting together for a Saturday night dance. Those that had instruments brought them; those who could play played them and for a few hours the heat, work and hunger took a back seat to social activity and, unless I miss my guess, some moonshine saved back for special occasions. Steinbeck had no way of knowing, but he was describing the germination of the mid twentieth century cultural phenomenon of West Coast Country Music.

World War II brought prosperity to California and the labor camps gave way to subdivisions and tract homes. The California Okies had become a prosperous working class and provided an audience and an impressive stable of performers and musicians for a brash new music scene. Country music became a

staple in the new media of Television and every suburb of San something or other somewhere near LA had a Country music honky tonk. West Coast Country Music had talent, venues, product and exposure and the American music scene would never be the same.

Leo Fender was an accountant who taught himself electronics and would secure a slot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for his role in the development of electric guitar technology. In 1951 he introduced the Fender Broadcaster which would be renamed the Telecaster due to supposed copyright infringement. The Telecaster became the first commercially successful solid body guitar. It was cheap, easy to play, nearly indestructible and the gritty, twangy sound was unsurpassed for cutting through the din of a raucous honky tonk or the limited sound reproduction capability of the AM car radios of the time. The Tele quickly became the guitar of choice among West Coast Country musicians.

West Coast Country began to dominate the national scene in the early 1960s via the success of Buck Owens. Owens and his band The Buckaroos went solidly against the conservative trends of the Nashville establishment, using a honky tonk / Rockabilly feel characterized by Don Rich's twangy Telecaster and drummer Willie Cantu's driving back beat shuffle at a time when full drum sets were not even allowed on the stage of Nashville's Grand Old Opry. The demure image of the female country singer was displaced by the commanding stage presence of Rose Maddox and the down to business lyrics and performances of Jean Shepard. Close on Buck's coat tails followed the likes of Tony Booth, Freddie Hart, Wynn Stewart and Buck's sometimes friend and long time associate, Merle Haggard who is arguably among the most influential musicians of the twentieth century. Guitarists like Don Rich, Roy Nichols, James Burton, Gene Moles and Gene Breeden (my mentor) picked up their Teles and redefined the guitar in Country music. The term "Bakersfield Sound" emerged as the influence of West Coast Country coalesced around Buck Owens' home town.

There is little left of the glory days of the Steinbeck's Mother Road other than the highway itself. Still, it was a nice drive on into Kingman as I enjoyed reverie and reflection serenaded by my favorite Country music. As I drove, it occurred to me that the music is so much more than just sound coming through the car stereo. Music is an artifact of the culture not unlike the crumbling buildings, the rusty car bodies and the dilapidated tourist traps I had seen that day. Behind every Telecaster twang or bold country lyric is an echo of the lives and dreams of the desperate and destitute Okies who, so long ago, traveled the same road I was traveling and whose stories, lives and culture defined the music I so dearly love.

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