

"Country Music in Radio Space"
Testing McLuhan's "Laws of Media" on a Culture's 'Mediation'

- Christopher Dawes -

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Country Music as we know it today originated in the values, customs and inherited Anglo-Celtic folk tradition of an impoverished, white, rural, regional and isolated American South. Music pervaded households, workplaces, schools, churches and social gatherings: found in all aspects of life, not only was it intimately infused in the daily lives of southerners; it also codified and shaped their regional and collective identities, and enshrined their values and beliefs into a common social language.

The changes that befell “rural white southern music”¹ when the south was itself transformed by immigration, industrialization and urbanization are often attributed to the advent of records and radio, which slipped easily into a society already steeped in music. In the 1920s country music entered *radio space* and, with 1930s syndication, that space and its catchment area ballooned to encompass all of urban America. Predictably, the music itself had to change with the advent of the radio *Barn Dance* phenomenon, and with the establishment of Nashville as its dedicated industrial centre. While this change is

¹ Jeffery J. Lange’s expression, although it should be noted that while it showed African American influence well before it reached white urban America, country music became quickly and easily coded ‘white’ for the benefit both of the majority, ruling rural white population it came to identify and the equally dominant urban white population which adopted it so enthusiastically.

well-documented in cultural historical terms (Lange, Malone), no study of my discovery has yet sought to understand it within the realm of the theoretical, rather than the phenomenological.

The purpose of this paper is to apply Marshall McLuhan's theories of media behaviour to the collision between the "media" of music and radio using the birth of modern country music as a case study, and then to speculatively continue that study by examining the state of country music in our own time.

Marshall McLuhan on Media, and in Space

In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Herbert Marshall McLuhan defined the term "Medium" in several ways, all considerably broader than that now accepted as conventional in communications study and common parlance, "The form and technology used to communicate information". As the Greek derivation suggests, media are those things which *come between* other things: for example, between an event and a TV news viewer lies the medium of television, and within it are hidden a microphone and camera, transmission apparatus, a concise and hastily-prepared script, reporters, researchers, editors and technicians, and the viewer's receiving set, all of which impact his or her reception of the event.

McLuhan styles technologies that 'extend' people, their thoughts, senses, bodies and actions, as media². The shoe can be said to extend the foot (because it allows it to walk farther and more easily on more surfaces than it could bare), just as the amplifier and the radio can be said to extend the ear (since they enable hearing of things too quiet or too distant to be heard by the ear unaided). Cave painting and handwriting extend human thought beyond the usual limits of time and space (allowing a person not in the spatial or temporal presence of the thinker to know his or her thoughts), and as Gutenberg's invention of moveable type in the 15th century gave birth to the mass media it extended human thought *simultaneously to many persons* not in

² McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Introduction p.6

the presence of the thinker. As in the television news example above, media often contain one another: the ear-extending microphone, the eye-extending camera and the judgment-extending reporter exist within the medium of television.

Music, which extends composers' and cultures' thoughts and identities in unique and powerful ways, can be argued itself to be a medium: but to speak in meaningful terms about who or what it extends it must be split into its many historical, geographical, technical (and ultimately, perhaps arbitrary) categories of genre. Jazz and country music, for example, emerged in America at roughly the same time, and are closely tied to the advent of radio: but because they extend differing communities and ideologies (in very broad terms: on one hand, an intriguingly seedy and appealingly easy-going urban black community and on the other, a simple, home and family-based religious rural white community), they must be viewed as different media for discussions of extension³.

In *Laws of Media: The New Science* (published posthumously in 1988), McLuhan sought to articulate the dynamics of technology change by proposing four "laws" of media⁴.

1. media *extend* (enhance, amplify),
2. media *obsolesce* (do away with things no longer needed or relevant),
3. media *retrieve* (restore older actions and ideas usually obsolesced by preceding technological advance), and

³ It should be noted that in McLuhan extensions achieved through media are not necessarily intended by those they extend: they simply happen as a result of technology's power to transform its users. Urban blacks didn't create jazz, nor rural white folk, country, in any bid to 'conquer America' – rather their identities and ideologies were in a sense extended by means of the proliferation of their music through the media.

⁴ McLuhan, along with son Eric who published *Laws of Media* posthumously, identify the "Laws" not as an underlying theory, but "rather, a heuristic device, a set of four questions" which they called a tetrad.

4. media *reverse* (take on the opposite effects of their original extension) when overheated.

Naturally for McLuhan, radio conformed to the laws of media: its *extension* of the global community of listeners was providing access to the entire planet: everybody, everywhere. He suggests that it *retrieved* the trauma and paranoia of a certain tribal ecology lost in the print culture, resulting in such things as hypersensitivity to the dangers of alcohol (giving rise to prohibition), and the racial fear and bigotry that enabled the Nazis to come to power. It *rendered obsolete* wire connections because information no longer needed them in order to be transmitted, and physical bodies, since proximity was no longer a requirement of voice-to-ear communication. Finally, a medium posing as truth *reversed* into theatre, since disembodied sounds came to represent reality (Orson Welles' Invasion from Mars), and the world reversed into a "talking picture", rather than an actual place⁵.

In *McLuhan in Space* Richard Cavell asserts that space "is the single most consistent concept in McLuhan's vast and eclectic body of work", and argues that readings of McLuhan as simple media or communications theorist have resulted in frustration among scholars who might well otherwise have found the truth and innovation now increasingly accorded McLuhan's work, and more troublingly in his dismissal by many who might find much instructive and intriguing⁶. Cavell cites Carleton Williams, Joseph Frank, Wyndham Lewis and

⁵ McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, radio tetrad on p.172

⁶ Cavell, preface pp.xiii, xviii

Siegfried Giedion as having had the greatest influence on the development of McLuhan's notions of space, and his book provides a thorough account of these scholars' specific impacts on McLuhan⁷. In McLuhan, *spatial theory*⁸ manifested most prominently in the notion of *acoustic space*, by which he referred both to a *physical* area in which sound may be heard, and an *imagined* area within which humans interact by means of sound. Thus, radio broadcasting extended the physical area of music's acoustic space by making it audible to people well beyond its point of origin, and extended the imagined, or to use a more recently fashionable term, *cultural space*, in which it could convey culture, and in turn be influenced by it. According to Elvin Hatch,

"Culture is the way of life of a people. It consists of conventional patterns of thought and behaviour, including values, beliefs, rules of conduct, political organisation, economic activity, and the like, which are passed on from one generation to the next by learning - and not by biological inheritance."⁹

Because of the accompanying diversification of the constituent people(s), when the physical and imagined area(s) in which a given culture is active and acted upon change boundaries, contained media can not help but change with them. Moreover, radio's relocation of musical reception from rural public space (school house, saloon) to urban private space (listener's home) came loaded with specific environmental baggage, including its removal from the family/group context. As media ecologist Jay Hodgson summarized McLuhan (along with Toronto School of Communication

⁷ Ibid, pp.7-16

⁸ not so much a "theory" as a viewpoint applied to diverse phenomena and concepts when articulated in terms of physical, literal and imagined spaces

⁹ Hatch, p.178

colleagues Innes and Havelock) on the subject, "...the geographic reach of a medium, combined with the sensory privileges it construes, constitutes a 'communications system' in its own right... [which is] at once material (a physical environment which exists wherever a medium happens to be) and epistemological (a way of knowing and constituting the world which exists as whatever a medium enables its listeners to perceive)."¹⁰

Hodgson's remark suggests that we must view a rural music's migration into urban America as more of a reincarnation than a simple relocation. Music in the living rooms of urban America was a different animal than in the town halls and churches of the south, and with a new ecology, listener sensibilities and rituals, cultural and economic Darwinism would compel the species to evolve.

Country Music: Case Study of a Musical Medium

Lange ties the modernization of "rural white southern" music directly to revolutionary waves of migration and mechanization in an American south that had persisted relatively unchanged from its 19th century form well into the 1930s¹¹. When first recorded commercially in the early 1920s, the genre which was to become known as country music was similarly unchanged from the original folk-based form that could be heard throughout the rural south. But changes soon emerged, as northern urban-based studios appropriated the style for commercial use, always targeting the lucrative urban consumer market and

¹⁰ Hodgson, p.2

¹¹ Lange, p.19

often, although not exclusively, using urban performers¹². Shortly after the term “Hill Billies” was coined by Ralph Peer for a band he recorded in 1925, “hillbilly” and later “country” came to describe a distinct genre of white southern music, apart from the broader designation of “folk” which also took in Appalachian balladry, cowboy songs, and the indigenous music of Native Americans and rural blacks.

But as important as records were to the “modernization” of country music, radio would have its own, still more important, part to play. The April 1924 launch of *WLS Barn Dance* in Chicago started a trend that turned country music into a national phenomenon, and by 1935 some five thousand stations across the U.S. were featuring the genre. The 1925 launch of *WSM Barn Dance* (later the *Grand Ole Opry*) in Nashville was more indigenously-conceived, targeting a growing rural listenership rather than the urbanites who preoccupied northern stations, and evolving a distinct and proudly southern style.

How was the *actual music* of this home-spun, rural, amateur, folk idiom impacted by all of this? Both records and high-power transmission radio had the effect of spreading styles and individual artists’ fame quickly across vast spaces and huge numbers of listeners. Lange also quotes historian Robert Coltman, suggesting that after the success of Jimmy Rodgers, performers seeking to make a living from music would learn styles such as blues and ragtime, and tricks from

¹² It should be noted that while some of the new shape of country music came from urban performers, Jimmy Rodgers was an important early indigenous southerner to become a leading exponent of the music, and was in particular known for his penchant for singing and playing a variety of musical styles including jazz and blues. He became a model for young southern performers, who were becoming increasingly connected to urban life.

pop crooners, jazz musicians, gospel singers and even Latin dancers, incorporating these gradually into their own songs¹³. The increasingly urban location was also significant: America's great northern cities contained more and more migrant southern workers nostalgic for home, and a still greater number of northerners attracted to the simple, quaint and honest values coded within old-fashioned society, particularly as the U.S.A. rushed headlong into modernity, war, technology and global economic power. Ironically, while urban America gravitated to rural music's values, another principal effect of the urban presence in the industry came in the lyrical subject matter, where increasingly songs affirming the values of home, family, mother and God gave way to those mirroring the urban "boy-meets-girl" romantic preoccupation of, among others, the crooners¹⁴.

It would be a mistake to assume that rural America passively accepted the urbanization of its music on the radio waves. Derek Vaillant's account of radio-age correspondence between rural Wisconsin listeners and their Country Life movement-driven broadcaster, WSA University of Wisconsin, addresses more directly WSA's privileging of classical music programming over country music than the latter's pollution by urban musical styles and lyrical ideals: but the sentimental concordance among farmers wary of high falutin' urban culture is not hard to see. This sentiment was clearly catered to by radio manufacturer Atwater-Kent in an ad in the *Wisconsin Agriculturist* extolling radio's ability to

¹³ Lange, p.26

¹⁴ Ibid, p.38

keep rural families together when it proclaimed "There are no songs like the old songs", and preyed upon parental fears their young adult children's moral conduct in the evenings and eventual desertion of the farm for the city when it claimed to "keep the boys and girls home".¹⁵ The desired retrieval of "true" country music from commercial hillbilly music, what historian Bill C. Malone calls "the barbarian that slithered through the gates of presumed cultural purity"¹⁶ persists in our own day. In a 2003 interview with Laurie Joulie of real country advocacy group "Take Back Country", Malone, the son of a Texas farmer, nostalgically echoes the sentiments of his forebears on the subject of commercialization:

"We heard the radio hillbillies and we thought of them as part of our own family. When we heard the songs we thought they were singing about their own lives... And they cultivated that sense of family... They sounded like we did. They voiced sentiments we agreed with... I'm willing to give the Top 40 people their due, I think there are good musicians but the songs they perform say nothing."¹⁷

A McLuhan Reading of Country Music in Radio Space

The "rural white southern music" that predated the 1920s record revolution and the 1930s radio boom was a rough-hewn, amateur musical medium. It was replaced by what is now generally understood to be country music, a highly-polished, eclectic fusion of styles serving a large and growing urban community and also spreading "back to the land" to overtake its precursor. Treating the

¹⁵ Ibid, p.71

¹⁶ Malone, Don't Get Above Your Raisin, p.18

¹⁷ Malone interviewed by Joulie, Part 1

advent of country radio music as a technological advance, McLuhan might have mapped it to his Laws of Media as follows:

Country radio music *extended* the values of an impoverished and quaintly backward south to northern and urban locations across the USA. In turn American national cultural space was extended to include the south: migrant rural folk working in cities could feel culturally served there while northerners and urbanites co-invested in the wholesomeness and simplicity coded in an indigenous American music.

Those values were neither new nor unknown to the broader population which adopted the music for its own, nor indeed to the urban listeners who had other preoccupations in the 1920s and 30s: country music radio *retrieved* from actual or constructed memory the old-fashioned (and in certain encodings, *white*) values of home, family and religion seemingly threatened by industrialization, economic depression, technology, war, and (again, in certain encodings) jazz, other non-white culture.

It *obsolesced* several earlier genres including the simpler, rougher form from whence it came. Because the expanded market transformed the southern musical genre without changing the attribution to the south, the constituent folk, cowboy, gospel and other Afro-influenced constituent musics (and accompanying ideological content) were relegated to the catchall "American Folk" designation, unknown to the vast northern urban population which innocently accepted the 1930s radio version of country music as an authentic

voice of the south. Malone and Oermann reserve their bitterest criticism for Nashville, whose claims to represent country have arguably done more to annihilate it than even radio.¹⁸

It *reversed* into a romanticized, musically cleaned-up, more popular-styled and celebrity-based form devoted increasingly to the ideas and emotions of urban culture, and ultimately contributed to the near-extinction of the music which had given it birth. This reversal has spawned a counter-movement of retrieval, which has found considerable support three quarters of a century later, in our time.

¹⁸ See Oermann, pp1,2 and Malone interviewed by Joulie, Part 2

Afterword

History, with its cycles of revolution, counter-revolution, radicals becoming establishment ripe for fresh unseating by new radicals (and so on), is replete with irony. Just as Nashville's noble defense of the "authentic country sound" eventually gave way to the multi-million dollar pop-crossover industry we know today it has sparked yet another McLuhanian reversal in an end-of century revival of interest in the old-time music it sought to protect, but instead drove into obscurity. The soundtrack to the 2000 Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* represents many song styles from mountain music and gospel to delta blues, hobo songs and chain-gang chants now encompassed in the "Old Time" category referred to by the dean of Nashville music writers Robert K. Oermann in his notes to the recording:

"There is another Nashville, with a kind of music so distant from what the city's commercial centre cranks out as to be from a different planet. It thrives in the community's nooks and crannies like a cluster of quietly smiling mountain wildflowers in the shadow of those cultivated hothouse blooms that flaunt their colors [sic] on radio stations from coast to coast... what this seemingly ethnic sound is, is country music. Or at least it was before the infidels of Music Row expropriated the term to describe watered-down pop/rock with greeting-card lyrics."¹⁹

If, as the runaway success of the *O Brother* soundtrack suggests, there is a revival of older country music underway, the question arises: are the ideals which gave country music its first phenomenal success and yet were compromised during its modernization still of interest to country listeners? It is precisely Oermann's "watered-down pop/rock" derivative format which forms the principal subject of a March 2005 Country Radio Broadcasters Survey of

¹⁹ Oermann, p.1

11,000 P1 listeners (that is, those for whom a country radio station is their favourite) in all age groups and both genders at 13 stations throughout the United States²⁰. Besides suggesting that socio-political stereotypes of political conservatism, churchgoing, and family-centredness associated with country listeners are not always born out in statistics, it suggest that country music retains much of its original encoding:

- While only 29% surveyed had children under 13, they felt (87%) they could listen to country with the whole family with confidence in appropriateness for and acceptance by their kids.²¹
- 61% attend religious services at least once a year (39% once/month, 24% once or more/week)²²
- 89% surveyed described "the country music of today" as the same or better than that of a few years ago. While the study is unconcerned with whether or not that 'music of today' reflects "old time" content or shows old-time influence, the number who cite an improvement is roughly the same number as describe a decline in the quality of pop and rock during the same period.²³
- 61% surveyed said that country music makes a positive contribution to American life.²⁴

Later in his 2003 interview for "Take Back Country", Bill Malone refers to the success of *O Brother* and Grammy nominations for Joe Nichols as a hopeful signs for older country, and later in the same paragraph, to his errant prediction in a 1985 revision of his 1968 book, *Country Music USA*:

"I thought that pop juggernauts were just going to engulf music and everybody was going to grasp for the crossover songs. Luckily for all of us the neo-traditionalists keep coming. The Alan Jackson's, Ricky Skaggs', Emmylou Harris' keep bringing it back to something that still sounds country."²⁵

McLuhan never commented directly on country music's migration through radio, but he would certainly have argued that while radio redrew the

²⁰ This survey, which asked respondents about their vote in the 2004 Presidential Election, their feelings about the Dixie Chicks/Iraq War debate and the Janet Jackson wardrobe incident at the 2004 Super bowl, makes for fascinating reading even outside of its intended audience, advertisers on country radio.

²¹ Edison Research Survey, p.19

²² Ibid, p.20

²³ Ibid, pp.11, 40

²⁴ Ibid, p.21

²⁵ Malone interviewed by Joulie, Part 2

boundaries of its acoustic space it was no revolution, since the music already existed in the primarily oral tradition of the rural south. Noting, perhaps, that country music had moved directly from its oral tradition to its aural reincarnation in urban America without passing through the subverting printed page that occasioned the drifting apart of words and music in classical music²⁶, he would possibly have hailed radio as the faithful conveyor of the culture this paper argues, perhaps, it was not. Ultimately, though, I believe particularly that, had he lived to see the persistence of interest in country's founding values and forms, he would agree that his revisited and reapplied insights into the extensions of man, his "New Science", provide a useful way of addressing the shifting paradigms of creativity and consciousness, of change and constancy, of culture and commercialism that increasingly frame discourse about music in the age of the broadcast media.

²⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.281

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