

## Chapter 3

# MUSICAL GENRE AS MEDIUM

Marshall McLuhan

**me·di·um** (n) An agency by which something is accomplished, conveyed, or transferred.  
(n.p.) media

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## Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980): Probing Media in Mid-Century

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born in Edmonton, Alberta in 1911 to Scotch-Irish Protestants: his father an insurance salesman descended from a long line of farmers, and his mother a sophisticated well-read elocutionist known and travelled widely in theatre circles. His mother, Elsie Hall McLuhan ensured that both her sons pursued intellectual careers, and that Marshall, the academic star, would be educated abroad. When Marshall was 9 they moved to Winnipeg, where he would attend high school and the University of Manitoba, completing Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English literature by 1933, proceeding on scholarship to Cambridge University in England thereafter. The 1930s literary life at Cambridge (and indeed at Oxford, and in London) was teeming with scholars taking an interest not in the traditional brokers of power, but in the lower orders, the "masses", some as Marxists and some as scholars of what would later be called 'popular culture'. Moreover, there was brewing a resurgence of interest and credibility of Catholicism within the literati, due at least in part to the work of Hilaire Belloc

and G.K. Chesterton. Tom Wolfe has observed the profound impact this unique environment had on McLuhan:

Two of the most brilliant and seemingly cynical of the London literati, W.H. Auden and Evelyn Waugh, converted to Catholicism in this period. Likewise, Marshall McLuhan. He became a convert to the One Church – and to the study of popular culture. Although almost nothing in McLuhan's writing was to be overtly religious, these two passions eventually dovetailed to create McLuhanism.<sup>52</sup>

McLuhan finished at Cambridge in 1942, returning to North America with second Bachelor's and Master's degrees, and a Doctorate in English Literature, teaching at a number of Universities and finally joining the faculty of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. It was here, under the influence of economic historian Harold Innes, that he formulated the basic tenet of McLuhanism, that any great new medium of communication alters the entire outlook of the people who use it.

McLuhan's master stroke, which rocketed him to international celebrity (eventually to be followed by near complete dismissal by academia in the decades which followed) came in 1964: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, from which his most known aphorism "The Medium is the Message" sprang. McLuhan, while accurately predicting the spread of television all over the world and the now-familiar sensory paradigm shift evident in the usurped primacy of the visual print medium by what he called the "audio-tactile" medium of television, he also foresaw the unification of the entire world into a "global village", which in a rare religious reference he saw, at least potentially, as a technologically-enabled manifestation of the body of

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<sup>52</sup> Wolfe, Tom. Introduction to *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews of Marshall McLuhan*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Limited, 2003, p. xiii

Christ with all humanity as members. McLuhan's popularity grew astonishingly through the 1960s, but by the mid-1970s an academia which he routinely dismissed as regressive, incompetent and hide-bound to paradigms that were long expired was managing to turn the tables. If "turnabout is fair play", the aloofness and dismissal McLuhan had showered upon the literary and scientific communities that opposed him was fairly turned back upon him, and he died an ingenious, and to the end arrogant, has-been in 1980.

## Extending Humanity: McLuhan and Media

The American Heritage dictionary gives no fewer than fourteen further definitions in ten categories of the word media/medium in addition to that given at the outset of this chapter. Nowhere to be seen among them is that from *Understanding Media*, where McLuhan defined the term considerably more broadly than any of them, and especially than its most popular technological definition, "The form and technology used to communicate information."<sup>53</sup> 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.

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<sup>53</sup> Though I (like, it would seem, most others who cite it on the Internet) was not able to track down the origins of this definition, it is one of three (along with computer storage devices like discs and also connection cables used in networking) whose appearance together is so common on Internet documents addressing technology as to justify my crowning it *media's* 'most popular technological definition'. It also has the attraction of covering the more general public's association with communications media such as television, newspapers, etc.

But McLuhan styles all technologies (not simply communication technologies) that 'extend' people, their thoughts, senses, bodies and actions, as media<sup>54</sup>. 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 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-

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<sup>54</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). First MIT Press Edition with Introduction by Lewis H. Lapham. (Boston: MIT Press, 1994). p.6

based religious rural white community), they must be viewed as different media for discussions of extension<sup>55</sup>.

Before we turn McLuhan loose on Musical Genre, an understanding of one of his last works *Laws of Media: The New Science* (in progress at the time of his death and published posthumously in 1988), is in order. In what some call an attempt to answer his critics' dismissal of his media theories as insufficiently developed and supported, McLuhan sought to articulate the dynamics of technology change, and to systematise the phenomenon's behaviour by proposing four "laws" of media<sup>56</sup>.

- 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 technologies), and
- 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

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<sup>55</sup> 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 represented by their genres, and of course other media like radio and recordings.

<sup>56</sup> McLuhan, along with son Eric who published LM posthumously, identify the "Laws" not as an underlying theory, but "rather, an heuristic device, a set of four questions" which they called a tetrad.

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 place<sup>57</sup>.

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 intriguing<sup>58</sup>. Cavell cites Carleton Williams, Joseph Frank, Wyndham Lewis and 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 McLuhan<sup>59</sup>. In McLuhan, *spatial theory*<sup>60</sup> 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,

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<sup>57</sup> McLuhan, Marshall and McLuhan, Eric. *Laws of Media: The New Science*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988). p.172

<sup>58</sup> Cavell, Richard. Preface to *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 2002). pp.xiii, xviii

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp.7-16

<sup>60</sup> Cavell points out that spatial theory is not so much a "theory" as a viewpoint applied to diverse phenomena and concepts when articulated in terms of physical, literal and imagined spaces.

“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.”<sup>61</sup>

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 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).”<sup>62</sup>

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

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<sup>61</sup> Hatch, Elvin. “Cultural Space” in *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, ed. Kuper, Jessica and Kuper, Adam and Kegan, Paul. (London: Routledge 1985). p.178

<sup>62</sup> Hodgson, Jay. *Marshall McLuhan, Media Ecology, Muzak and Multinationalism: Charting the Environmental Impact(s) of Broadcast Music*. Paper presented at “Over the Waves” Conference, McMaster University, March 2005. p.2

ecology, listener sensibilities and rituals, cultural and economic Darwinism would compel the species to evolve. Let us now trace that evolution with a particular eye to Christian content.

## Christian Country Music: Case Study of a Genreal Medium

As Patrick Kavanaugh asserts in *The Music of Angels – A Listener's guide to Sacred Music from Chant to Christian Rock*, next to traditional gospel and CCM (Contemporary Christian Music), country music has the greatest Christian content of any popular twentieth-century music<sup>63</sup>. This #3 title can refer not just to explicit Christian textual content and the direct musicological debt it owes to the worship and praise songs of southern Protestantism, but also to the comparative number of actual musicians openly and explicitly professing and living the Christian faith. Unlike gospel and Contemporary Christian Music, Christian Country Music is, Kavanaugh continues,

...primarily found within mainstream secular music... Thus, gospel singers and CCM bands are typically known as Christian artists and would have to cross over into secular music to be appreciated by the masses. Such genres as country, jazz and folk are basically mainstream.

This is somewhat simplistic. There does exist today a genre of music called "Christian Country Music" which arose during country music's popular surge in the 1980s, having its own record labels, artists and professional associations like the Christian Country Music Association

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<sup>63</sup> Kavanaugh, Patrick. *The Music of Angels: A Listener's Guide to Sacred Music from Chant to Christian Rock*. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999) p.264



and the Christian Country Network, that like their CCM counterparts make a clear and vigorous distinction between themselves and the secular country music industry. Ultimately, though, the grammatically-created ambiguity over whether one refers to Country Music that happens to be Christian, or Christian Music that happens to have been written in a country style, is of limited use. While some of the literature refers to “Christian Country” as the 1980s genre mentioned above, while using “Country Gospel” to refer to Christian content in the work of otherwise secular artists, record labels, etc..., the terms are used more-or-less interchangeably by musicians and associations on both sides of the sacred/secular fence, and refer primarily whether the music “sounds” more like gospel or country. Since this chapter deals primarily with a radio-induced genre evolution that took place prior long to the 1980s, it is the persistent Christian content of so-called secular country music that I will address.

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 and the faith 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”<sup>64</sup> when the south was itself transformed by immigration, industrialization and urbanization are often attributed to the advent

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<sup>64</sup> 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.

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.

Jeffrey J. 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 19<sup>th</sup> century form well into the 1930s<sup>65</sup>. 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 often, although not exclusively, using urban performers<sup>66</sup>. 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.

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<sup>65</sup> Lange, Jeffrey J. ‘Radio Barn Dances, Schoolhouse Shows’ and ‘Hillbilly’ Domestication in *Smile When you call me a Hillbilly: Country Music’s Struggle*. (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2004), p.19

<sup>66</sup> 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.

Southern (or “white”) gospel, perhaps the truest ancestor of present-day Christian Country Music, traces its roots back to the shape note and sacred harp singing traditions, and rural revivals and singing schools and conventions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but evolved principally, always parallel to and mostly segregated from “black” gospel, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-1920s Southern Gospel accounted for some 20% of recording releases on the Columbia label<sup>67</sup>, buoyed in no small measure by the reactions against newer and racially othered genres such as jazz and blues.

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. As money became scarce during the Depression, radio quickly supplanted recordings as the dominant medium for the spread of music, since it was cheaper to buy a radio than to amass recording libraries.

How was this home-spun, rural, amateur, folk and formatively Christian 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

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<sup>67</sup> Cusic, Don. *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel and Christian Music* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp., 2002), p.162

seeking to make a living from music would learn styles such as blues and ragtime, and tricks from pop crooners, jazz musicians, gospel singers and even Latin dancers, incorporating these gradually into their own songs<sup>68</sup>. 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 crooners<sup>69</sup>.

It would be a mistake to assume that rural America passively accepted the urbanization of its music on the radio waves. As radio came increasingly into play the othering of urban black genres in rural settings also grew. Don Cusic locates this split also in terms of the sacred rural vs. the secular urban, but suggests that a special affinity existed between country and gospel, which shared a rural heritage. Even black gospel, which was becoming more and more coded 'urban' by the rise of the Holiness movement, was highly influential on both white gospel and country.

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<sup>68</sup> Lange, Jeffrey J. 'Radio Barn Dances, Schoolhouse Shows' and 'Hillbilly' Domestication in *Smile When you call me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle*. (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2004), p.26

<sup>69</sup> Lange, Jeffrey J. 'Radio Barn Dances, Schoolhouse Shows' and 'Hillbilly' Domestication in *Smile When you call me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle*. (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2004), p.38

The music that came from urban areas – particularly jazz and rhythm and blues – was deemed “dirty” by the rural audiences, who extolled the virtues of rural living and insisted on “good, clean family entertainment.” This split between the sacred and the secular did not affect country and gospel music at this time: most country performers ‘did’ gospel songs, and most gospel groups included some country or “folk” songs in their repertoire.<sup>70</sup>

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 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”.<sup>71</sup> 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”<sup>72</sup> 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:

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<sup>70</sup> Cusic, Don. *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel and Christian Music* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp., 2002), p.172

<sup>71</sup> Vaillant, Derek. “‘Your voice came in last night... but I thought it sounded a little scared’: Rural Radio Listening and ‘Talking Back’ during the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920-1932’ in *Radio Reader*. Ed. Michelle Hilmes and Jason Loviglio. New York: Routledge, 2002. p.71

<sup>72</sup> Malone, William C. *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin: Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. p.18

"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."<sup>73</sup>

## A McLuhan Reading of Christian 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 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-

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<sup>73</sup> Malone, William C. *A Conversation with Bill Malone*, interviewed by Laurie Joulie in *Take Country Back*, 2003. [Interview online]. (accessed [April 9, 2005]) <http://www.takecountryback.com/malone1.htm>. Part 1

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, and other non-white cultural content.

It *obsolesced* several earlier genres including the simpler, rougher form 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.<sup>74</sup>

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, and the role being played in that retrieval by the Christian songs that so characterized the genre prior to its urban migration on radio is of little surprise.

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<sup>74</sup> See Oermann Liner Notes, pp1,2 and Malone Interview, Part 2

## Country Music in 2000: Roots and Revival

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."<sup>75</sup>

Of the 19 old-time songs selected by Ethan and Joel Coen for *O Brother, Where art Thou*, six, including "Down to the River to Pray", "I'll Fly Away" and "Angel Band" are authentic southern and black gospel- and otherwise explicitly Christian praise, worship and devotional songs that could have been (and indeed still are) sung in churches, revival meetings and other Christian settings. While four of the remaining could be called purely secular, the other nine

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<sup>75</sup> Oermann, Robert K. Liner notes for soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. Mercury Records compact disc 088 170 069-2, 2000. p.1



(including the four renditions of “I am a man of Constant Sorrow”, “Keep on the Sunny Side” and “Lonesome Valley”) are in a quintessentially country textual genre, in which songs are more about the general hardships of life, but nonetheless contain explicit and obligatory Christian references of trust in God and the hope of salvation.

It is important to understand that I trace the dominance of Christian content in this defining old-time “roots” revival cultural icon not to illustrate the level of Christian content in pre-radio age Country music, for no 20<sup>th</sup> century historical parody could be relied on to demonstrate this definitively. Rather I seek to illustrate the McLuhanian retrieval of that content in the form of the film’s surprise 21<sup>st</sup> century popularity, and of course, that of its soundtrack.

If, as the runaway success of the *O Brother* soundtrack and other cultural developments suggest, there is a revival of older country music underway, the question arises: are the ideals, including Christianity, which helped give 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 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 States<sup>76</sup>. Besides suggesting that socio-political stereotypes of political conservatism, churchgoing, and family-centredness associated with country listeners are not always borne out in statistics, it suggest that country music retains much of its original encoding.

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<sup>76</sup> 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.

- 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.<sup>77</sup>
- 61% attend religious services at least once a year (39% once/month, 24% once or more/week)<sup>78</sup>
- 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.<sup>79</sup>
- 61% surveyed said that country music makes a positive contribution to American life.<sup>80</sup>

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.<sup>81</sup>

McLuhan never commented directly on country music’s migration through radio, and as a Catholic with a clearly expressed love of the Latin Mass and other pre-Second Vatican Council aspects to worship,<sup>82</sup> would be unlikely to have a very high opinion of it. He would have argued that while radio redrew the 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

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<sup>77</sup> Edison Research. *Study of Country Radio's P1 Listeners* [survey conducted by e-mail and presented at Country Radio Seminar 36] Nashville, March 2005. Accessed March 7, 2005, <http://www.crb.org/main>. p.19

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, pp.11, 40

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.21

<sup>81</sup> Malone, William C. *A Conversation with Bill Malone*, interviewed by Laurie Joulie in *Take Country Back*, 2003. [Interview online]. (accessed [April 9, 2005]) <http://www.takecountryback.com/malone1.htm>. Part 2

<sup>82</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. “The Microphone and the Liturgy” in *The Critic*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, Oct./Nov./Dec., 1974, pp. 12-17

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 music,<sup>83</sup> 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.

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<sup>83</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). First MIT Press Edition with Introduction by Lewis H. Lapham. (Boston: MIT Press, 1994). p.281