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Western Music Awakening

Western music is stirring from its long slumber, and a whole new world awaits.



Cowboy Songs featured the Bruce Woods Dance Company performing to live music by Michael Martin Murphey and his band. Here they are shown during one of their rehearsals in Bass Performance Hall.

BY JOE FRALIGA

*They used to call it "country and western."
Could someone tell me where the western went?
Did it stray from the herd like some poor dogey
That wound up tangled in a barbed wire fence?*

—Jon! Harris

DALLAS, Texas—The spacious, posh confines of the new Eisenmann Center for the Performing Arts held a capacity crowd as Michael Martin Murphey's *Cowboy Songs* cut loose, an innovative and stylish stage production of modern dance routines backed by classic cowboy tunes performed by Murphey and his band.

Earning rave reviews, *Cowboy Songs* received accolades as something "exuberant," "rousing," and "sassy." Its choreography was deemed a direct-line descendant of the work of George Ballanchine, Twyla Tharp, and Martha Graham. "Cowboy Songs did the cowboy culture proud with a bang-up show that left you cryin' for more," observed the *Dallas Morning News*. "You knew it was good when the shrieks and whistles poured forth. The excitement was not just for the dancers. They were fabulous, but so was the music by guest artist Michael Martin Murphey and the Rio Grande Band."

Murphey himself seemed elated afterwards as he signed autographs in the lobby. He has performed the program in a handful of venues, including the magnificent Bass Hall in Fort Worth.

But Murphey's latest coup is just one of a growing number of breakthroughs in a field—Western music—that shows signs of taking off. Red Steagall's *Cowboy Gathering*, held annually in Fort Worth, attracted huge crowds in October. Other shows report upswings in attendance. And on the music front there is a crop of fresh faces who are making people stop and listen. Myra Pearce, Kata Hay, Ginnie Mac, Dave Alexander, Tammy Gialason, Kacey Musgraves, Breten Hill—these are not household names yet, but they are working on it.

Western music's mainstays are staying with it,

"People come up and say, 'Thank you for staying true.'"

too. The man who might be deemed the dean of cowboy singers today, Johnny Western, spoke to *American Cowboy* two months ago from Wichita, where he is a radio personality on KFDI, and said at the time that he had recently "done Williamsburg [Western Film Festival] in March and it was absolutely huge. And of course Carnegie Hall selling out [for the *Prairie Rose* show] was fabulous and the impetus from that rolled into Charlotte. It's just like there's a real groundswell."

Western, best known as the writer and performer of the smash hit theme song "The Ballad of Pecos River," for the classic television Western series



"If we're going for radio airplay... it'll have to be well done." Jon! Harris makes her play this year with a new album on Wildcatcat.

Have Gun Will Travel, is one of the most accomplished cowboy singers living today.

Says Western: "The Gene Autry [Okla.] show is selling out every year, and so is the Autry [Muscum] show in Hollywood." Both are shows at which Western, a former Gene Autry band member, performs. "These things are sold out way in advance."

Radio airplay seems to be the last hurdle for full respectability.

"I hear it all the time, all the time," says Dan Roberts, singer/songwriter who toured as opening act for Garth Brooks on the latter's *Fresh Horses* tour a few years ago. "They say: 'How come we don't

hear this on the radio? Why doesn't radio play that?' It's a mystery to the general public why radio doesn't play [cowboy or Western music]."

Roberts and his bunch—his musicians and promoters/marketers behind the scenes—are part of a new breed. They are independents, breaking their own trails because the mainstream music industry would ignore, if it could, any genre other than pre-ordained, heavily marketed ones.

Yet Roberts has three efforts that are said to be in Grammy contention this year—all of them tied to his new *Viva La Cowboy* release. He's coming off the best year he's had since launching his own label five

“Western music is the only genre that hasn’t exploded in the past 60 years... it can be the next big thing.”

years ago. A recent single of his, “Swinging Til We Can’t See Strait,” a swing music tribute to George Strait, has been in the top 20 of the Texas Music Chart. “It’s getting about 1,500 spins a month in Texas and Oklahoma, he says.

The chorus of the title track of Joni Harms’ brand new CD release, *Let’s Put Western Back in the Country*, says it all.

Let’s put the western back in the country

Hello out there, we’re still here.

We ain’t dropped off in the ocean... not yet

Rode off in the sun and disappeared...

Harms says people come up to her all the time to say that they wish they were hearing more of this kind of music on

the radio. “That is one of the most rewarding parts of performing in this genre,” Harms says. “People come up to you and honestly say, ‘Thank you for staying true to making this kind of music.’”

“I have a co-writer in Nashville, Wood Newton, and we were talking about how, in a way, my music is too Western for country, and in some ways too country for Western,” says Harms, of Canby, Ore. “I like swing and full band productions and sometimes

the Western Music Association fights a little of that, and fights the Nashville thing, and yet Nashville is a big part of what I am. I love being on the Grand Ol’ Opry. I’ve spent a lot of time there... I was in Capitol, Universal, and Warner Brothers [record labels]. I believe they know how to make music there that is radio ready and can compete with anything else that is on the market. But the Western Music Association has talked about getting more Western into the country [music] too. Wood and I just felt that we turn on country radio and we miss the Western influences.”

She adds: “I believe that you have to spend money to compete with all the other music out there. If we’re going to really go for radio airplay and get this to a larger audience, it’s going to have to be well done.”

It was this kind of thinking that led Harms to become the first artist in the stable of the new Wildcatter Records, headquartered on the Wildcatter Ranch, a resort and dude ranch now in development outside Graham, Texas. The chief executive officer of Wildcatter is Mickey Dawes, a Western music performer himself and former president of the Western Music Association.

“Right now my focus is to really put what I consider contemporary Western music out in the forefront,” Dawes says. “Joni would be the poster child for that. Hers is a mix between classic country music and Western music. She represents that better than anyone I’ve seen. I want to push Western music that has a high commercial content to it, because for you

to get any mainstream market penetration, you have to have commercial viability. You have to start out with a wonderful song, and then have full instrumentation and high production values.”

In order to get this package before the public and into the public consciousness, one has to be “aggressive and selective in who you put out there,” Dawes says, and in Harms he feels that Wildcatter has the right artist.

“Joni is one of very few people in the Western market who routinely appear on the Grand Ol’ Opry—Riders in the Sky is another,” he says. “Now, there is a nostalgic market for simple acoustic cowboy music, and it will always be there, but if you really and truly want to introduce this music [genre] at a social level that gets right to mainstream America, you have to have the total package. There are songwriters and there are musicians and there are singers, and Joni is the culmination of all three. As an added bonus, she has the highest level of credibility when it comes to Western content, because she is sure-enthough cowgirl... She is a modern-day Dale Evans. She raises cattle, she raises Quarter Horses, she holds numerous rodeo queen titles, and you put a guitar in her hands and she can make that thing sing. And she has the heart and soul.”

Was it travelin’ on a stage out of Denver

That never made it into Santa Fe?

Was it ridin’ on a train held up by Jesse James

Who took the gold and made a getaway?

Bobby Newton, publisher of *Rope Burns* newspaper and organizer of the Academy of Western Artists, says that Western advocates are mobilizing.

“We’re hoping to take Western swing and Western music back into the mainstream public,” Newton said. “The music is not something suggestive—we give the public an art form that paints a portrait of a positive America and a positive future. And it reflects the cowboy image, which is above reproach. The only people who don’t like it are the people who have not heard it lately. We’re seeing a new generation of performers arise—they’re doing a new contemporary music that is still in the style of Bob Willis and Roy and Dale and Gene. But we’ve seen that when younger audiences are exposed to Western music and Western swing, they love it. They say, ‘Where has this been?’”

The bottom line, Newton says, is that it works. “Our records sales are up; our artists are working more; they’re getting more notice. It’s all on the upswing, and we’re close to breaking through, back into the popular market. Fort Worth has helped.”

By “Fort Worth” he refers to the AWA’s annual awards ceremony, informally

known as the Will Rogers Awards, held each year in the Fort Worth area. This show has grown swiftly in popularity—so much so that it has outgrown its venue.

“We’re moving to

“It’s a mystery to the general public why radio doesn’t play cowboy or Western music.”

the Doral Tosoro,” Newton says, referring to a five-star resort and country club complex across from the Texas Motor Speedway, a few miles north of Fort Worth.

“We’ll put the chuckwagons right out on the golf course,” he says. “We’ll have performers from all over the United States and Canada. A large trade show, too. We’re expecting about 1,000 attendees for the awards show, and we should have 100 to 150 trade booths. As far as active performers there, should have three to four hundred. [Not all will perform—though some 80 or so will be showcased.] And I expect from 30 to 70 chuckwagons. We’re having a poetry ‘rodeo’—with judges and a round robin format. A lot of performers will come to look around and to network. We’ll also have a lot of disk jockeys. Our membership is up almost 300 percent over two years ago. We’re getting more studio musicians, writers, producers, etc., in addition to entertainers. We’re going to throw a party, and if a convention breaks out, so much the better, but we’ll create the environment where everybody enjoys themselves.”

He pauses for breath. “You either grow or you die,” he says with a laugh.

The AWA Awards are slated for July 9-13, 2004, with the awards show itself slated for the 13th. For information, call (580) 388-5350 or visit www.workingcowboy.com.

Mickey Dawes is another who is GTT—Gone To Texas. Dawes moved there to run the new Wildcatter Records, the label for Joni Harms.

According to Dawes, “If you look back at the time when Western music and Western movies were at their height, people were struggling to find heroes, and when those performers were at the top of their game, we had Western heroes and high quality song content, too. Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Dale



Dan Roberts, who released *Viva La Cowboy* recently, is getting fresh attention and good reviews.

good leaders, it can be the next best thing to happen in America. And it will be like it never happened before, because there’s nobody around who remembers it much.”

Kimes, another artist whose music has been recorded by Garth Brooks, went to Nashville years ago and ended up sleeping in his car. But he learned. And he went independent, forming the Wonderment label. He and his band, the Packing Iron Posse, are so cowboy they wear six-guns—45s—on stage.

“The Western acts out there now are better than they were four or five years ago,” Kimes says. “I believe that the artists and the music industry as a whole will look for the best independents who are putting out the best music. Things are changing fast. The way we know the business today, well, in three to five years it won’t be the same. Everybody is going to download their music—a song at a time, or buying whole albums. But it’s changing in favor of the little guy, like the Western singers who have labels of their own. They’ll have to work at it, but it’s going to happen.”

“The independents are becoming a new frontier,” Kimes concludes. “It’s going to be like it was in the beginning of the music business, when the independents ruled. History repeats itself, and here we come.”

Let’s put the western back in the country,

You can either sing along or lend an ear

Well pardner it’s your choice—won’t you listen to the voice

Of the sons and the daughters of the pioneers?

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