

"COUNTRY-MUSIK?"—SOME NOTES ON THE POPULAR MUSIC OF TEXAS AND THE GULF COAST IN WEST GERMANY

by *Richard C. Helt*

The lead article in the October 1976 issue of *country corner*, one of two nationally circulated country music periodicals in West Germany, details the rift between the Nashville country music "establishment" and the "outlaws" of the fledgling Texas progressive country movement, and portrays in enthusiastic metaphors the music of the "sogenannte Texas Outlaw Sound" ("the so-called Texas Outlaw Sound") of Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and colleagues: "In der Tat, im Rieseneintopf der Produkte aus den Studios von Music City, U. S. A. muten die Klänge der 'Rebellen' wie exotische Farbtupfer an . . ." ("It's a fact that the sounds of the 'rebels' come across as exotic spots of color in the gigantic ragout of products which come out of the studios of Music City, U.S.A.").¹ Similarly, the other German *Country-Zeitschrift* ("country journal"), *Hillbilly*, featured a lengthy report on Jennings in its September issue of the same year, including an introductory editorial comment on the central role played by the singer in the formation of the new movement:

Diese Titelstory ist einem modernen Künstler gewidmet, der zwar schon seit geraumer Zeit ein profilierter Vertreter dieser Musik ist, aber doch immer wieder neue Wege suchte—und auch fand. Ausdruck dieser Unruhe war seine maßgebliche Beteiligung an der Begründung der vieldiskutierten "Outlaw-Bewegung," mit der einige progressive Country-Musiker aus den eingefahrenen starren Gleisen der in Nashville etablierten Country Music ausbrachen und nach Texas gingen. Man kann Waylon Jennings fast als "Anführer" dieser Outlaws bezeichnen. ("This title story is dedicated to a modern artist who, despite his having been for some time a well-known representative of this genre [Nashville sound], has always sought new paths—and found them. The best expression of his dissatisfaction was his decisive participation in the founding of the much-discussed 'outlaw movement,' through which some of the progressive country musicians broke out of the rut of the Nashville country music establishment and went to Texas. Waylon Jennings can almost be called the 'ringleader' of these outlaws.")²

While the latter reporter admittedly approaches the boundaries of journalistic objectivity and accuracy, the nearly adulatory tone of his remarks is

Richard Helt is Assistant Professor of German at Rice University.

hardly surprising to anyone familiar with the greatly idealized stereotypical German image of the American West. Clearly, Waylon Jennings is presented in these articles as the descendant of the brave individualists who settled the West, and the account of Jennings's own tribulations is replete with motifs that characterize many a fictional and cinematic western hero: the protagonist's confrontation with the "establishment" (Nashville), his breaking of ties with his former (professional) life and his exodus to a new territory (Texas), the eventual recognition and acceptance by his peers as well as by those powers that had initially frustrated and rejected him (both articles note that Jennings received the Country Music Association's award as "Singer of the Year" in 1975). That Jennings, a native Texan, chose to return to his home state only serves further to romanticize the story in the eyes of the German fans. As Hermann Lammers-Meyer, leader of one of the top country-folk groups in Europe, explains: "The state of Texas has always epitomized the American West for the young Germans of today, and they rather naturally associate the new Texas progressive country music with that whole western image."³

Indeed, the Germans' interest in "Country-Musik" in general stems directly from their fascination with everything "western," from blue jeans (*der* or *die Bluejeans*), leather clothing, and bourbon whiskey, to detailed histories of the American Indian and American television series dealing with the Wild West (always among the most popular television shows in the Federal Republic). Thomas Freeman, writing in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, mentions that Germans tend to confuse the era of the pioneers with that of the Wild West, but as he rightly observes, "this is not important since the appeal of both eras to the Germans is essentially the same: they were the times of brave, adventurous, ideal heroes."⁴ Similarly, many young German "Country-Musik" fans don't distinguish very specifically between the origins of bluegrass and those of more commercial forms of country music, but as the remarks from *Hillbilly* imply, "country" in all its various shadings is associated with those idealized western heroes.

Even though the "Country-Boom" in Germany—and Holland—is to some extent only a slightly delayed manifestation of the recent stateside upsurge in the popularity of country music, that genre had nonetheless enjoyed a modest popular following there since shortly after the Second World War. Just as in pre-war Germany, when Dixieland jazz attained a significant level of popularity, radio became the vehicle for the propagation of American popular music—only after World War II it was an *American* system with half a dozen stations scattered throughout West Germany and Berlin: the American Forces Network.

"When I was fifteen years old, I stumbled onto a song, somewhere on the radio, called 'He'll have to go' by Jim Reeves, and I thought, 'Wait a minute, what is that?' . . . Naturally, I tried to find the same station again and found . . .

the AFN station, which had a regular country music program, 'Howdy, neighbors, it's the 1505 to Nashville.' . . . Yes, I believe it was in those old Jim Reeves songs on the radio that I first heard a pedal steel guitar."⁵ Thus German steel guitarist Hermann Lammers-Meyer recalls his introduction to American country music. Thousands of German pop musicians and millions of German fans of American music could offer similar testimony regarding the development of their own popular music tastes. Not only were radio listeners able to pick up AFN stations all over West Germany and in many parts of the Eastern Sector, they also found on AFN a much higher percentage of program time devoted to popular music than was customary on European stations.⁶

The first genres to benefit from such relatively extensive exposure, as British popular musicologist Michael Watts notes, were swing, bebop, and modern jazz,⁷ but the first new mass audience of German fans created by AFN did not form until the advent of rock 'n' roll in the fifties. As this new genre began to dominate the popular music charts in the States, it quickly gained a correspondingly larger portion of the programming time scheduled for popular music at AFN until, by the early sixties, rock 'n' roll amounted to fifty percent or more of the popular music played on the American Forces Network.⁸ Because the charts were updated weekly at AFN, its programming reflected almost immediately changes in taste "back home," and thus, as Watts further observes, AFN "emphasized the very latest crazes in America *as they happened*, the immediacy being an integral factor in pop."⁹

Since rock 'n' roll was the dominant popular music in the States from the mid-fifties on, it was the most played pop genre on AFN, but the network was not unaware of the fact that the several hundred thousand U.S. troops in Germany and France included a high percentage of Southerners (including Texans) and rural Midwesterners. Consequently, a significant amount of music programming on AFN featured genres that were the favorites of many of these men—bluegrass and "country," i.e., everything from western swing to the then fledgling Nashville amplified sound whose main exponent was Johnny Cash. As late as the early 1970s, in fact, the broadcasting day began at five o'clock in the morning with "Hillbilly Reveille," sixty minutes of bluegrass and Nashville tear-jerkers played by request.

A number of country musicians who were later to become top artists in the field spent their active military duty in Germany and played there. Johnny Cash purchased his first guitar and organized his own band while an airman in Germany from 1951-1954,¹⁰ and Tom T. Hall, whose Army group met with considerable success playing Non-Commissioned Officers' clubs, was even featured live on AFN. Hall also wrote a number of songs of the "lonesome GI" ilk during his Army stint, such as "Short Timer's Blues," "Thirty-six Months of Loneliness," and "3,000 Gallons of Beer."¹¹

The many country and bluegrass groups that played the Enlisted Men's and NCO club circuit in the fifties and sixties in Germany, however, rarely encountered Germans in their audiences except those actually employed in the clubs or the "Fralines," as the American soldiers usually referred to their German girl friends; had it not been for AFN broadcasting of American country music, this genre might still be known in West Germany only to a relatively small group of genuine initiates.¹² Unlike the almost overnight popularity of rock 'n' roll in the late fifties, of course, country music only gradually achieved the modest popular following it enjoyed by the end of the sixties, but without the nearly twenty-year history of regularly scheduled country music programs on AFN, the current "Country-Boom" in Germany and Holland would not have been possible.

One other notable source of German interest in American country music, especially old-time, bluegrass, and black "country blues," is the traditional German fascination with foreign folk culture. Since at least the late eighteenth century, when Johann Gottfried Herder published *Stimmen der Völker* ("Voices of the Nations"), an anthology of folk songs from such diverse peoples as those of Greece, Scotland, Peru, Greenland, and Latvia, Germans have enthusiastically collected and enjoyed foreign folk songs and popular music; the young Goethe, for instance, delighted in his forays with Herder into the Alsatian countryside to collect songs of the peasants. Herder's concept of *Naturpoesie*, which refers primarily to the unrestrained, spontaneous, "natural" poetry, dance, and song of the common folk, became widely popularized in the nineteenth century and has remained current in Germany in the twentieth century by the Germanized English term *Folklore*. Originally suggested in this meaning by the British literary historian William J. Thoms in 1846, *Folklore* was first used in Germany much as a synonym for the more general German word *Volkskunde*. Since World War Two, it has increasingly assumed the generic connotation of folk and popular music while retaining the implication of specific ethnic and geographical origins.¹³ Popular usage of the word always includes an attributive adjective denoting the national or ethnic derivation of the music, for example, "südamerikanische Folklore" (South American), "irische Folklore" (Irish), "griechische Folklore" (Greek), or, where two or more of these types are combined, "internationale Folklore." Until recently, traditional American folk songs were classified generally as "amerikanische Folklore" or specifically as "Bluegrass-Musik" or "Old-Time-Musik," and usually did not include black folk and country songs, for which the designation "Blues" was generically reserved.

Unlike country music and bluegrass, which were unknown in Germany before World War Two,¹⁴ black country folk and blues music could tie into an already existing popular musical tradition in Germany, that of Dixieland jazz (originally known as *Negerjazz*, "Negro Jazz," in Germany), which had flourished there in the twenties. Post-war German audiences clamored for

Dixieland and the newer forms of jazz that had been developing in the thirties and forties, and the "blues renaissance" of the late fifties was greeted enthusiastically in the Federal Republic. Since the early sixties, national blues festivals have been held annually in Berlin, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, and other major cities.

Black American *Folklore* is thus a thriving, if somewhat esoteric genre, and several well-known black blues musicians from the States, among them Champion Jack Dupree, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and Willie Dixon, spend many months each year on tour in Germany. Although American blues music is generally considered to be common to all the southern states, German followers seem especially fond of blues artists from Texas and the Louisiana-Mississippi delta region. Jazz and blues critic Joachim-Ernst Berendt, who initiated the Folk Blues Festival,¹⁵ views early blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson (born near Wortham, Texas, in 1897, died in Chicago in 1930) as the main representative of the *vorklassischen* ("pre-classical") blues period and considers Texan Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins (born in 1912 in Leon County) as "der größte der neuen Blues-Sänger" ("the greatest of the new [contemporary] blues singers").¹⁶ Two of the most outstanding blues musicians of all time, Louisianans Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter (1885-1949) and Lonnie Johnson (1894-1970), were among the earliest blues performers to tour Europe and quite conceivably helped to create the European preference for the New Orleans and Gulf Coast blues style. It can fairly be stated, however, that this musical genre was anticipated in Europe at least two decades before Ledbetter's 1949 Paris concert by a direct descendant of the original New Orleans black jazz style that derived from almost precisely the same origins as the blues: Dixieland jazz.

Enjoyed today by the third generation of European fans—and played by the second generation of European musicians—Dixieland is thriving 5,000 miles away from its Mississippi delta home at a time when American interest in the genre has probably never been so slight. In no other country on the Continent is the appeal of Dixieland stronger than in West Germany, where every major city has its own Dixieland groups and clubs. Hamburg, which has become the center of popular music in Western Europe in the seventies, boasts fifteen to twenty German bands regularly playing Dixieland, including such names as Abbi Hübner's Low Down Wizards, Mississippi Cotton Pickers, Jazz Hounds, Kid John's Deep Southland Stompers, and Papa Tom's Lamentations Jazzband. Dixieland's prevalence, however, is by no means limited to the large cities. The Flower Street Jazz Band, for example, has played for almost ten years to packed clubs and taverns throughout western Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony), an area considered by most Germans to be a bastion of cultural provincialism. Nor is the popularity of Dixieland restricted to a specific age group or social class, which is the case with more recently evolved genres such as rock and modern jazz; its appeal cuts across

age barriers and class distinctions more than any other genre of popular or serious music in West Germany. In fact, it can probably be said that Dixieland jazz, an essential part of the first wave of American popular culture to hit Germany, has so firmly established itself as to be thought of by the Germans themselves as "traditional" popular music.¹⁷ Personal favorites of the young may be hard rock, country, or the vapid German *Schlager* (Top Forty hits), the musical preferences of older segments of the population may be German classical or even folk music, but all enjoy Dixieland, particularly in a live setting, and seem even to treat it as an authentic part of their own cultural heritage. For example, the traditional German Sunday morning *Frühschoppen* (literally, "early pint"), a gathering of people of all ages at the village or neighborhood tavern, now sometimes includes a Dixieland band in what is certainly a unique juxtaposition of foreign culture and indigenous custom in modern Europe.

The current "Country-Boom" in Germany and Holland is thus not likely to result in the replacement of Dixieland by "Country-Musik" as the most preferred popular music of foreign origin, yet the extent of country music's popularity by the mid-1970s, particularly in northern Germany and Holland, is significant enough to indicate that the genre will be in evidence on the European popular music scene for many years to come.¹⁸ The still increasing popularity of American country rock, Southern or "Dixie" rock, and, especially, the music of the Texas progressive country movement, has already led to the development of a clearly distinguishable German country guitar picking style, an early example of which can be heard on Hannes Wader's 1972 album, *Sieben Lieder* ("seven songs"). Wader's German rendering of the traditional Gulf Coast song "Cocaine Blues" was one of the first commercially successful songs of the German country-blues style. More recent German versions of popular American country music include Lammers-Meyer's renditions of two Texas songs, Guy Clark's "Desperados Waiting for a Train" and Ray Wylie Hubbard's "Redneck Mother." Lammers-Meyer's own band, the E. L.¹⁹ Hillbillies, has an obviously Texan orientation and uses as its standard introductory announcement, "From deep in the heart of the Emsland . . . the Emsland Hillbillies!"

In view of the fact that millions of Americans have lived at least briefly in West Germany since the end of the Second World War, it is by no means astonishing that German popular music taste is rather Americanized, especially when one considers the cultural impact of the American Forces Radio (and Television) network there. That the popular music, however, of one section of the United States, the Texas and Gulf Coast region in particular and the South in general, has become so popular, is quite a remarkable cross-cultural phenomenon, and one that clearly seems deserving of a much more extensive investigation than the present study can possibly undertake. There is no doubt that the cultural heritage of Germany is widely evident in

Texas, but today there are also distinct indications that, in the area of popular culture, the Lone Star State is exerting significant influence on the Federal Republic.

NOTES

1. Manfred Vogel, "Schafft die Country Music ihren Durchbruch aus dem Underground?" *country corner* 12 (October, 1976): 3-4.
2. Peter Anderl, "Waylon Jennings," *Hillbilly* 5 (September, 1976): 5-7.
3. Hermann Lammers-Meyer, personal interview, June 6, 1976.
4. Thomas Freeman, "The Cowboy and the Astronaut," *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1972): 83-103.
5. Lammers-Meyer, personal interview. Reeves, whom country music historian Bill Malone credits with having had "perhaps the greatest ability to appeal to popular audiences without losing his sense of country identity," was born in East Texas in 1923 and died in an airplane crash in 1964. Bill Malone, *Country Music, USA* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1975), p. 256.
6. According to Robert J. Harlan, Program Director for AFN in West Germany, the amount of popular music broadcast weekly now totals nearly 110 hours. Personal letter, December 29, 1976.
7. Michael Watts, "The Call and Response of Popular Music," in C. W. E. Bigsby, ed., *Superculture—American Popular Culture and Europe* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, 1975), p. 125.
8. Approximate percentages based on my two years spent listening to AFN Frankfurt and AFN Munich as a soldier in Germany, 1959-1961.
9. Watts, "Call and Response," p. 128.
10. Frederick E. Danker, "Johnny Cash," in Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh, eds., *Stars of Country Music* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 292.
11. William C. Martin, "Tom T. Hall," in *Stars of Country Music*, p. 361.
12. American country music enjoys a decidedly greater popularity in northern than in southern Germany. Not only are there more fans of country music in the North, but the centers of German "Country-Musik" are also there, in Hamburg, Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, and Oldenburg (Lower Saxony), where there have never been more than a few American servicemen. There has been, however, an American Forces Network Station in Bremerhaven, located sixty kilometers north of Bremen and broadcasting to most of northern Germany and Holland.
13. At least one major *Folklore* festival, however, seems to be returning to a more traditional format. The annual Braunschweig *Folk-Meeting*, in existence since 1972, limited participation in the 1975 and 1976 festivals to groups performing strictly traditional folk music. Not only were groups representing six European countries in attendance, but there was also, for the first time, a *Tanzworkshop* (dance workshop) featuring folk dancers from Poland and various parts of Germany.
14. Of course, one should not overlook the fact that country and bluegrass music are less than fifty years old in the States.

15. Berendt, along with fellow Germans Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau of the German Jazz Federation, established the FBF in 1960-1961, and it has visited Europe every year since 1962. There is no doubt that it has been the principal medium through which many lesser-known blues figures have been introduced to audiences in Europe; cf. Bob Groom, *The Blues Revival* (London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1971), p. 79.

16. Joachim Ernst Berendt. *Schwarzer Gesang II: Blues* (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962), pp. 107 ff.

17. Similarly, reports Rice University sociologist Chad Gordon (personal interview), British fans refer to Dixieland as "Trad" or traditional jazz. There, as in West Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, and Scandinavia, it is obviously not so important that this music is of "foreign," i.e., North American, origin; the Europeans seem rather to have claimed it as their own. One cannot escape the feeling that at least the Germans and the British do not think of Dixieland as a particularly foreign popular music genre.

18. In the fall of 1976, for example, The Flying Burrito Brothers and the Marshall Tucker Band, two representative country rock bands from the States, played to full concert halls in both Bremen and Hamburg; crowds were estimated in both cities to be in the thousands.

19. This is an abbreviation for Emsland, the area in northwestern Germany between the Ems and the Weser rivers. Both Lammers-Meyer and his piano player, Horst Bösing, come from this area.