Film Review: Open Country

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When I was in high school in the late 1960s I had a friend who worked at the Ash Grove, a small, funky venue in mid-Los Angeles that showcased older musicians who had built the foundations of the contemporary music I mostly listened to—English invasion and psychedelic rock. I was privileged to see and hear Furry Lewis, Mance Lipscomb, Elizabeth Cotten, Reverend Gary Davis, Lightnin' Hopkins, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and a lot more mostly African American blues performers, although sprinkled in there were Mimi Farina, Hoyt Axton, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and other white folk, country and rock musicians.

One night I went to hear country blues artist John Lee Hooker, who I had heard there once before. Unfortunately for me the place was sold out and my friend couldn't get me in. But he led me around to the alley in the back, where a thin wall separated the stage from the trash cans, and handed me a joint. "This will be almost as good as being inside," he assured me. Given the thundering volume Hooker and his electric band were putting out, he was right. Between the joint and the visual memory of having seen his band once before, the wall really didn't seem to exist.

So I was delighted when a little ways into a new film on the roots of country music a younger John Lee Hooker appeared singing "Hobo Blues", accompanying himself on acoustic guitar—the side of Hooker I was a little too late to have experienced.

Alternative narrative

Beyond that personal reverie, *Open Country*, a ninety-minute video documentary by Sacramento DSA members Glenda and Jesse Drew, offers a fresh take on received truths about country music. Assembling interviews with musicians, scholars and political activists, archival footage of musical performances and events in working class history, all engagingly held together visually with motion graphics animation, the film is a thoughtful, provocative and entertaining journey through an alternative narrative about where one of American popular culture's biggest industries came from. Its conclusions will perhaps surprise and certainly convince you.

Open Country makes two main political claims: that country music was in its origins a multi-cultural and often progressive "people's music", despite the framing that conservatives have promoted for decades that country is innately conservative. The film also makes clear that the music has deep roots not only in Nashville, the Southwest and Appalachia, but legitimately in California as well.

Origins

Prior to the identification of the genre with the right, what became "country" was an early twentieth century informal myriad of tributary streams, including "hillbilly music", the blues, bluegrass, gospel—roots music of all kinds, mostly known collectively as "folk music". Although the process had begun earlier, these were sorted and separated in a serious way beginning in the 1920s by the commercial recording industry and nascent radio broadcasts, as business considerations—particularly ownership and copyright, mostly unconsidered by early practitioners—shaped distribution, and capital sought the most lucrative ways to sell records to audiences.

The changeover within motion pictures from a silent medium to sound in the late twenties allowed these musical forms to reach ever-growing audiences; the singing cowboy came along with westerns to spread the word almost from the beginning of the sound era. (Although unmentioned in *Open Country*, animated cartoons functioned in a similar way, with "bouncing ball" singalongs to popular tunes and Betty Boop cartoons featuring songs recorded especially by Black jazz musicians like Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong.)

Jim Crow played a role here as well in placing black and white recording artists into different aisles of record stores and indeed different stores. But it took until the 1950s before "hillbilly" or "old-time" music, in distinction from other folk traditions, became walled off from more overtly progressive lineages and rebranded as "country and western", and then simply "country". The film points out that Hank Williams, generally regarded as the "father of country music" referred to himself as a folk musician.

As Wobbly singer Utah Phillips argues, "Country is unequivocally a people's music, a folk music, developed over generations as a common cultural property."

Open Country extends the point to the instrumentation itself, noting that banjos came from Africa as banjars with enslaved people; harmonicas in their earliest incarnations were Chinese reed instruments that later were transformed into their familiar shape in Germany and Austria; steel guitars were imported from Hawaii; fiddles from Celtic cultures, and so on.

Golden roots

California drew musicians alongside everyone else to its mythic dreamlands of gold rushes and instant riches, along with the mundane but more realistic lure of jobs and a relative tolerance for cultural difference. Think Woody Guthrie with the "Okie" Dustbowl migration; Hollywood as a destination for actor/cowboy/musicians like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, but also Bakersfield for Buck Owens and his Buckaroos and Merle Haggard.

The filmmakers, who worked off and on for two decades on *Open Country*, are themselves UC Davis professors and scholars of radical culture, with a combination of talents, interests and shared working class upbringings evident throughout. Glenda's design chops enhance the film's editing. Reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's Monty Python cutout animation, pieces of the frame de- and re-align to bridge transitions between sections and topics. Her drawn portraits of the musicians add a welcome visual dimension to our understanding of long-gone artists often now invisible except through their music. Jesse plumbed the depths of archives to come up with interviews, performances and history from the early days of the music and contextual working class life.

Amongst the illustrious interviewees who sat for the Drews' camera we find English radical rocker Billy Bragg, coal miners' songstress Hazel Dickens, labor folklorist Archie Green, legendary Communist folksinger Pete Seeger, California author Gerald Haslam and a ton of others.

Longer musical segments, please

If I have a complaint about *Open Country*, and it's a minor one, it's that the film is so crammed with the sprawling history, so bursting at the seams with musical plenitude and reflections on it, that some of the performances are given short shrift, with but a few measures of song provided like catnip before moving on to the next segment. I suppose it could be argued that one purpose of the production is to serve as an introductory primer for newcomers to the music, and the too-short bits o' song teasers will motivate viewers to pursue the artists and their work on their own dime.

And I hope they do, because as *Open Country* demonstrates, the music is worth it.

The politics here are not limited to the content of *Open Country*. As the website urges, the filmmakers would like you to organize screenings of the film for community building in progressive exhibition spaces and benefit progressive organizations of all kinds. If you want your friends to see it, you'll have to do this, because the film is not available for streaming online. And that's not all the work you will need to take on. The Drews will not charge you for showing *Open Country*. Instead, they say that "you can charge whatever you like and use the entirety of the income to support your good work! We only ask that you provide a modest contribution (to be determined) to a local musician to play a few songs at the beginning of each event."

As you might be gathering by now, *Open Country* represents a great opportunity for local DSA chapters to stage a cultural event for members and friends and raise a little money for the cause at the same. Win-win.

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