CULTURE MATTERS

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Open Country: Unveiling the Working-Class Heartbeat of American Country Music

Written by **Jack Clarke** • in **Music** 170

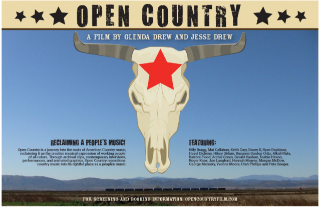
***Jack Clarke** interviews filmmakers and UC Davis (California) professors Jesse and Glenda Drew. They explore the working-class origins of country music, as well as its transatlantic influences and how it has been censored and stolen from us by right-wing American owners of radio stations*

JC: Today, we're delving into the heart of America with a genre as iconic as it is misunderstood: American country music. As a Brit, I always thought country music was all about cowboys and conservative values, but I was in for a surprise. It wasn't until I came across the work of Glenda and Jesse Drew that I realised country music has roots that run far deeper and stories that resonate with the struggles of working people on both sides of the pond. Their film *Open Country* explores the true origins of country music, revealing it as a powerful expression of working-class struggles and aspirations. It's a story of seeking freedom from government interference and striving for a dignified life.

To start with, I'd love to hear more about each of you. Could you both share a bit about your backgrounds and what led you to pursue filmmaking?

GD: Okay, I'm Glenda Drew. I have a background in photography, and from photography, I got into filmmaking. I joined a collective that Jesse was part of, Paper Tiger Television, which was working on using DIY aesthetics and techniques to tell alternative stories about the media.

JD: Yes, I've been working in media for a long time, not just in film but also with underground newspapers, radio, and television. I'm really interested in communications, and I've been a member of this group called Paper Tiger Television for a very long time.


OPEN COUNTRY
A FILM BY GLENDA DREW AND JESSE DREW
RECLAIMING A PEOPLE'S MUSIC!
FEATURING:
FOR SCREENING AND BOOKING INFORMATION: OPENCOUNTRYFILM.COM

Open Country is a journey into the roots of American Country music, reclaiming it as the creative musical expression of working people of all colors. Through archival clips, contemporary interviews, performances, and animated graphics, Open Country repositions country music into its rightful place as a people's music.

Billy Bragg, Mat Callahan, Keith Cary, Davey D, Ryan Davidson, Hazel Dickens, Hilary Dirlam, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Alkali Flats, Bairbre Flood, Archie Green, Gerald Haslam, Toshio Hirano, Roger Knox, Jon Langford, Hannah Mayree, Morgan McDow, George Metesky, Yvonne Moore, Utah Phillips and Pete Seeger.

JC: With both of you being professors at UC Davis, how does your academic background relate to country music and the research you undertook for *Open Country*?

JD: The funny thing is that country music is not exactly an academic subject. I have to say that this is something we've been working on kind of 'under the table' for a very long time. Country music is not much respected in academia, so this was kind of a side project. However, it definitely drove us heavily into research as we started to uncover what we see as the real history of country music.

JC: And what motivated you to explore the roots of American country music in *Open Country*?

JD: My past is a little unusual for a professor. I was a teenage runaway at 15 and lived in rural areas, doing a lot of farm work. I then worked in factories for many years. Even as a young person at 15, I started to connect with country music. You know, after working in a field all day, you just can't connect with Led Zeppelin anymore. Someone introduced me to Merle Haggard, and I thought, "Yeah, this guy really speaks more directly to what I'm doing." I spent many years doing industrial work in warehouses and factories, and really country music is one of the main, if not the only, music genres that addresses what people spend most of their day doing—which is working.

JC: Glenda, what motivated you personally to explore the roots of country music?

GD: Well, I grew up in a very working-class town on the border of Chicago, and my father was a truck driver, so we listened to country music in our house. I also worked in a factory during high school. Initially, I didn't give country music much thought, but when Jesse and I met, we would go to bars in San Francisco, hanging out together. We would always play these country songs on jukeboxes in cool neighbourhoods, and it became a way for us to connect. We started talking about the importance of this music and developed our ideas through these conversations.

JC: The British perception of country music often revolves around cowboys and farmland, with many unaware of its origins and viewing it as very conservative. How do you reconcile with the genre's associations with conservatism and traditional values?

JD: Well, I think that's one of the things we trace out in the film is that originally it was not connected to that kind of ideology at all. It certainly has been moved in that direction in recent decades, mostly through the influence of Nashville and the corporate culture of country radio, who own country radio and are really in a position to define what country music is. So, we wanted to roll it back and look at the past. I mean, the whole thing about cowboys is interesting as well. I mean, the whole notion of cowboys, we think of as these stoic, big white dudes with white hats on horses. But cowboys were working-class stiffs. That was a bad job to have. A lot of cowboys were black also; it was a working-class job. So, it is true a lot of music comes from those cowboys who were really singing about exploitation and hard times in their work lives. There was nothing heroic about it. So, that is one of the examples we'd like to point out in the documentary.

JC: You discuss how radio stations have banned and controlled country music due to conservative biases. How significant is the impact of that kind of censorship on the genre?

JD: It doesn't have to be outright banning, which sometimes it is. I mean, you know, the Dixie Chicks is a famous example of that. But the people who put those playlists together are very carefully trained. As we go over in the film, these huge radio station corporations that own all the country radio stations, they also own the urban stations too, which is kind of odd. So, they're not only defining what country music is but also defining what hip-hop is. I think that corporate culture, as we point out, is a really significant factor in terms of radio. Radio plays a large role, and one of the things we do with this film is we let groups use the film as a fundraiser. A lot of times, we offer the film to low-power FM and community radio stations, and really, that's where country music is still alive. You have people who genuinely care about the music. You can hear some real country radio on public radio stations and community radio stations, but you're just not going to hear it on Nashville stations.

JC: I noticed that the screenings of *Open Country* seem more like events than typical film screenings, with even live music performances included. How important is that in reconnecting with country music nationwide?

GD: We have a lot of interviews with local people in the film. They're the storytellers of this music, holding its history. Instead of focusing on big stars, although we do have a few well-known people in the film, it's really a story being told by local people who own that information and own that story. That's also how it's being rolled out. Local musicians come and sing a few songs, which really connects the audience in beautiful ways. Sometimes, even people start singing during the film, which has been very beautiful. We just had a show in Mars Hill, North Carolina, close to Asheville, and there were many audience members who were part of an old-time music lesson group. As songs came on that they knew, it was almost otherworldly in the room when all these people started to sing. They had some training in singing, so suddenly it was all these people around us singing these songs. It was really beautiful.

JC: Because of the way you have presented *Open Country* using more archival footage and historical facts over strong directorial opinions, have you received any backlash or resistance during development? Have there been people, for example, who feel they have ownership over how country music is presented and haven't liked your approach in the film?

JD: That's a very good question because, you know, a lot of times when you're creating something or editing something, you're writing something—I don't know about you—but a lot of times I have an imaginary person over my shoulder that I'm kind of addressing. And a lot of the editing, that was the kind of person that was looking over. So, I think the film is crafted in a way that really brings people onto our side. A lot of people point out that, "Oh, there's really very little narration in it." So, we're really not pushing a point of view. We are showing these real, authentic musicians and where they're coming from, and these are their lyrics. So, I think it neutralises and wins people over, which is really the goal.

JC: Yeah, well, actually, on that point, because you've got artists like Orville Peck, Mya Byrne, Charley Crockett and Lil Nas X, who have introduced new dimensions to country music, particularly appealing to the youth. They've done a lot of cross-genre innovations and more modern iterations of country music. How does this fit into the broader narrative you present in *Open Country*, and do you think it's a positive thing for country music going forward?

JD: We're not critics of contemporary country music, but I think what we're doing is providing a foundation for a lot of those people who can walk into the country music scene and feel comfortable, like, "Yeah, I have a place here." The whole controversy about whether a black performer can be a country music artist is just absurd. As we show in the film, much of the foundational roots of country music come from black performers and musicians. So, they don't necessarily have to feel like they're breaking into a new music genre—it's already there. They're reconnecting to those roots, to that past. So, I think we hope that this film encourages younger musicians to stake a claim and take back country music, which has really been our goal.

JC: The British Isles played a crucial role in the early development of country music with influences from English ballads, Scots Irish fiddle music, and more. How does *Open Country* address these transatlantic influences, and what impact do you think they've had on the genre's evolution?

JD: Well, I think one of the points we drive home is that country music is actually a very cosmopolitan form of music because, as you point out, it does come from all over the world. A lot of people think country music kind of sprang naturally from the hollers of West Virginia. It's very worldwide. Like you mentioned, people from Scotland, from Ireland, from the British Isles, they came in, they brought their musical traditions, meshed with a lot of music of formerly enslaved peoples in the South, and created new forms that then spread back to England, Ireland, Scotland. And it's not just within Europe, as we try to point out. Like the origins of the lap steel guitar, which is a very classic sound of Nashville, as you point out, that comes from Hawaii. It comes from Hawaiian musicians. And a lot of people are stunned to see that. A lot of people are still surprised that the banjo is African. You know, I mean, that always, you know, we've had country music people who come to the film and go, "I can't believe it, like what, the banjo was so American." But it's not, you know? So, it really is a mixture of world cultures.

For example, yodeling—the tradition of yodeling—there's a lot of yodeling in early country music. And people think of yodeling as being Swiss, well, it is Swiss, that's actually where it came from because there were Swiss musicians who were popular on the musical routes through the South in the '20s and '30s. They were a popular kind of sideshow, and people were like, "Yeah, that yodeling, that's great, I'm going to do that." And you know, it's this kind of hybrid musical form. And as also as you pointed out in the film, we looked at the influences from those countries that kind of created country music, but also now the music of the country music influences those cultures back. Like, you know, we have an interview with the Australian singer or the Irish singer, and it's like, well, they were raised on country music, but then when they start singing or playing it, they realise that, hey, wait a minute, there's something Irish about this anyway. So, it's really a hybrid.

JC: The exclusionary practices within country music such as racism and bigotry and the debates around the acceptance of gay or trans music stars, how has the genre historically dealt with these issues and what steps do you think could be taken to make country music more open and inclusive?

GD: Well, one thing, for example, we have a clip in the film of Linda Martell, who was the first black woman to be featured on Hee Haw and to also play at the Grand Ole Opry. She experienced a lot of abusive treatment from the workers, the people in charge at both of those places, those venues, and she ended up quitting music. She's still alive and she's amazing, but you know, it pretty much ruined her career, the mistreatment that she experienced.

I think that in the 70s, there was a band called Lavender Country who were like a queer country band. They were also very marginalized, but their music is great. And I think that there are pockets of performers today who are pushing the boundaries in all kinds of ways. We're seeing enormous cultural shifts, especially around gender and sexuality. And I think that we see that in all areas of culture, and it is certainly very contested, also politically right now, and, you know, very hot area especially with the election coming up. But I think that, um, I don't think that country music is, I mean, I guess it is different because of its reputation of being so conservative, but I do think that people are pushing the boundaries, young people. And I think that our film plays a good role in, again, you know, providing this groundwork. And we are having more and more young people coming to the screenings, which is really great also. So, I don't think I, I don't think I or we have like an answer of, you know, how to fix that, but I think these things are happening. And I think our film contributes to that conversation.

JD: Yeah, I don't think you can view the country music genre as separate from broader societal and cultural shifts. There's a segment of conservative whites who want to uphold a particular idea of what American country music should be, but it's increasingly under scrutiny and facing challenges. The boundaries of country music are evolving, influenced by wider cultural dynamics. Our film aims to reflect this evolution and engage with these ongoing conversations, showing how younger generations are redefining the genre's identity and inclusivity.

JC: So I want to take it on a little bit of an aside for a moment, but both of you being working-class academics and filmmakers, and having worked hard and fought against many economic challenges to get where you are today, what advice would you give to young and up-and-coming working-class filmmakers, musicians, academics, and others starting out?

JD: You know, I mean, it sounds cliché, but be true to yourself. Understand who you are, understand what ground you stand on, and don't pretend that you're like those other people. You know, because that does happen, particularly in academia. You have people come in and they're, you know, they just weren't raised like I was raised, to walk around in a tweed suit and go up to a lecture. It's all, you know, it's just kind of an odd thing. And I see people who are outsiders like myself try to fit in and try to be something that they're really not. And I think it's important, don't get into that. You know, stand on your own ground and trust who you are. That's kind of like my advice that I give people when I encounter people who come from a similar background.

GD: I think what's important is to lead by your values, to try to lead your life by your values as you're making decisions about jobs, or where you're going to live, or anything. We have a lot of anxious UC students who come to see us at the end of their journey of undergraduate education and want to know what they're going to do. I always talk about living by your values and that your path might not be like the capitalist path, and that might be better. I think our film, for me, when I watch it, I feel a lot better about my life and my choices because it foregrounds the creative soul and the importance of creativity, communication, connection with others. And I think those are the things to live your life by.

JC: I found here in the UK and from what I've been reading, and maybe I'm right or wrong here, is that there feels that working-class academics are pressured almost to adopt complex academic language, which I think makes their work inaccessible to the very communities they intend to serve. I presume this shift can make them feel as though they've become more middle-class to fit into these academic circles. As working-class professors yourselves, what's your general approach to this issue, and do you face similar challenges in your own ongoing work?

JD: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I mean, the use of language, you know, like you point out, it's like, you know, a lot of like academic papers, you know, like how can I write this to make it as unintelligible as possible? How many buzzwords can I put in it that can show off my unbelievable vocabulary, you know? If you can't explain something relatively simply, then you probably don't understand it yourself. And there's a lot of language thrown around in academic circles that is just window dressing, really.

GD: Well, our university, and I think many universities, have a mission to improve their communities and to reach out and affect people who aren't academics. Yet, that's often an uphill battle when it comes time for merits and promotions to say, "Well, I worked in these local spaces. It had a direct impact on community members around the university, instead of just my pure academics." It's a tricky thing, but I think it's so important. Actually, one of the things I really loved about Jesse when I first met him was I would read stuff that he would write, and it was all so smart and accessible. So many people could learn from what he wrote that was extremely smart and extremely accessible, and it just has a much greater impact. You know, I've opened books by more colleagues, and I don't get past the first two pages, and I was like, you know, it's just not worth my time because it's just people talking in very private conversations with other academics, and it's very limited.

JC: Finally, what do you hope audiences will take away from *Open Country* when they see it?

GD: Joy, I hope audiences will come away with a greater understanding and a lighter feeling about the state of country music, recognizing the possibilities not just within the genre but also in their own lives through creativity.

JC: Thank you, Glenda and Jesse Drew. It's been a fascinating discussion about your film, *Open Country*, and the deep roots of American country music. For our readers who want to learn more about the film, please visit here. *Open Country* is currently touring across the United States and will hopefully reach a wider audience in Europe soon.

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