Exploring Country

UC Davis professors produce a documentary on the history of country music.

by UC Davis Magazine staff | August 18, 2025

"Open Country," a film by Glenda and Jesse Drew, spotlights some of country music's more unsung talents. (Courtesy)

UC Davis professors Glenda and Jesse Drew aim to reclaim country music for working people through an original documentary, two decades in the making: *Open Country*.

"We feel like country music has kind of been taken away from its roots," said Jesse Drew, professor of cinema and digital media at UC Davis. "A lot of people today think it's very conservative and right-wing music, and that's not really its origins."

The Drews tell the story of country music through research and interviews, tracing the banjo back to Africa and the blurred lines of folk and country. They describe the film as a "homemade labor of love" because they did all the work from the editing to the animations. While they've worked on the film, they've given public talks on the project nationally and internationally.

"We made the talks quite interactive — we would talk, play some clips, ask questions, talk some more, and play some more clips, making it a lively and fun experience," said Glenda Drew, professor of design at UC Davis.

UC Davis Professor Jesse Drew, right, stands with folk musician Pete Seeger (Courtesy)

UC Davis Professor Glenda Drew (Courtesy)

The finished film features archival footage, performances and animated clips. Interviewees include Pete Seeger, Billy Bragg, Hazel Dicken, Utah Phillips, among many others.

The filmmakers also spotlight some of country music's more unsung talents and those who may have been lost to modern audiences. For example, Aunt Molly Jackson was a well-known singer-songwriter who is buried in Sacramento.

Released in 2024, the film is not headed to commercial distribution. Instead, the Drews said it's meant to be experienced in-person. Their screenings open with live music from a local musician. Upcoming screenings will be held in Albuquerque, Austin, Chicago, Santa Fe, Philadelphia and more.

"We want it to be a real event where people actually have to come together in a room, hear a local musician and have maybe a discussion afterward," said Jesse Drew.

He said that is the best way to understand the film's message.

They describe the message of the film as "country music is really the voice of working class, oppressed people, poor rural people, union miners, waitresses and many others. It's a music that springs from those roots. It's the music of the downtrodden. And it always has been."

— Reporting by Shelby Dioum '25

Primary Category

UC Davis Magazine

Tags

On Campus | Fall 2025

Copyright © The Regents of the University of California, Davis campus. All rights

This site is officially grown in SiteFarm.

Celebrating 100 Years of Graduate Education in Davis
See Butterfield Horse Sculptures at School of Veterinary Medicine
Get To Know the People and Projects Behind Aggie Square