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## Examining the country connection

BY MATTHEW MURPHY

IN HALIFAX THERE is one station that is always static: Country 101.9.

Why it has remained programmed on my truck's radio, and is the only station in my brother's car, are mysteries to me. Sometimes country music can provide great insight into the meaning of life while other times it seems to mutter along to an old family photo album.



Country has always been conservative but it has never before been in such a strategic position to flatten the minds of its listeners.

The question is: what's attractive about country music and can we separate the wheat from the chaf?

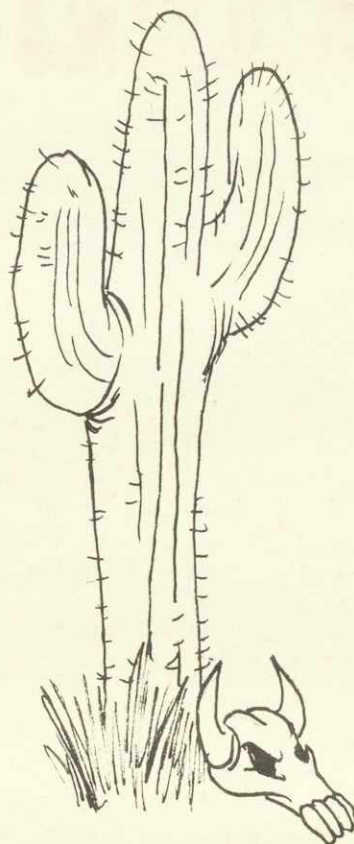
You can divide new country artists into two groups: Those who think they live country (Randy Travis, Travis Trent and Alabama) and those that use country music as a musical style (Dwight Yokum, Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood).

It is the former who have led this wonderful musical art form down a perilous garden path.

For most listeners, country living as expressed through recent country music is merely an illusion — a fanciful departure from the real world. Urbanization has displaced country music from its roots and it has been struggling to establish its authenticity since the early 1970s. Songs from the 70s and 80s,

like "I was Country when Country wasn't cool," "A Country Boy Can Survive" and "Country Boy," all try to root the artist and listener in time period that is gone and its value only imaginable.

Country music is best when it sings from the heart — love, heartaches, and cheatin'.



There are other subject matters which have been fused into the tradition like gunfighting ballads and truckin', but most new country panders to the false Utopian country model.

This myth of goodness associated with the country is what sells

a lot of records today. The urban dweller is sick of city problems and happily finds solace in the illusions of a simple rural life.

The result is a very bland and pathetic justification for making money.

Most new country is no longer connected to the past by land. The myth of country living is a false and empty touchstone.

When performers take this new direction, the congruent inspiration is lost and the music suffers. They have even come to be manipulated by conservative forces in the U.S. For example, George Bush recently commissioned Randy Travis to write a song called "Points of Light" that became a huge hit.

This trend might be tolerable were it not in the context of a capitalist music industry and the destructive capability of videos. Both these phenomena exacerbate and reinforce country music's plight.

These days, the best country musicians aren't wasting their time by shamming a mock authenticity; they are building on the musical tradition.

These valid country performers call on past motifs to reinforce the emotions they wish to express. They use the music and recognize the limits of its vocabulary.



For instance they don't do country covers of Sam Cooke songs or write about the little lady who works two desks down. These traditionalists have the right idea about country music and are the key to country survival.

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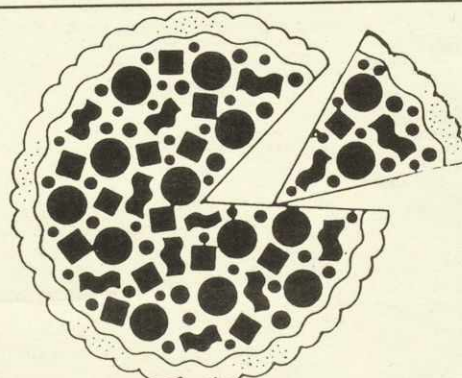
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