

Willie Nelson and the dirt behind the 'Country image'

by Marcia Merry

Willie: An Autobiography

by Willie Nelson and Bud Shrake
Pocket Books, New York, 1989
334 pages, paperbound, \$4.95

Country: The Music and the Musicians

The Country Music Foundation
Abbeville Press, Inc., New York, 1988
595 pages, illus., hardbound, \$65

As of year-end 1989, you could still find the book *Willie*, the autobiography of Willie Nelson, on the rack in the paperbacks section of most big supermarkets. To save yourself time and money—don't bother buying and reading the book—pick it up and flip through for some of the sections indicated below, to get an idea of the dirt behind Willie's "country" image. The publisher's book jacket calls the singer (born in 1933) the "legendary 'outlaw' of country music . . . an authentic folk hero of our times, the nearest thing we have to the poet laureate of the heart and the Heartland." But you had best judge for yourself.

Early in 1990, Willie Nelson will host the fourth national "Farm Aid" benefit concert and once again pose as the "friend of the farmer." His career says a lot about the dirty entertainment industry.

Chapter 14 of the book begins:

Sitting on the roof of the White House in Washington, D.C. late at night with a beer in one hand and a fat Austin Torpedo in the other, I drifted into a reflective mood.

My companion on the roof—it couldn't do him any good to use his name, except I should say President

Carter knew nothing about this and would not have condoned it—was pointing out to me the sights and the layout of how the streets run in Washington.

"That string of lights is Pennsylvania Avenue," my companion would say between drags on the joint and swallows of beer. . . . It was a good way to soak up a geography lesson, laid back on the roof of the White House. Nobody from the Secret Service was watching us—or if they were, it was with the intention of keeping us out of trouble instead of getting us into it. . . . I guess the roof of the White House is the safest place I can think of to smoke dope.

Hell, it had only been a couple of days ago that I was busted and locked in jail in the Bahamas for a handful of weed that I never even had a chance to set on fire. . . .

Marijuana is like sex. If I don't do it everyday, I get a headache.

I think marijuana should be recognized for what it is, as a medicine, an herb that grows in the ground. If you need it, use it. . . .

I have one firm rule with the band and the crew regarding cocaine: If you're wired, you're fired.

Anybody in the band or crew who hasn't quit cocaine has at least pulled up hard from the way it used to be. . . .

The idea of the *Willie* autobiography is the standard "bad guy with a good heart" routine. The bad side is the hard-drinking, dope-head, womanizing, yo boy stuff. In particular, this side was played up to help promote the release of such LP albums as the "Outlaws," in the 1970s, when the White House dope episode occurred.

In the 1980s, the "good guy" side of Willie is supposed to show through. He is backing the Farm Aid fundraising. "Obviously the three Farm Aids we have done have not cured the problems of the American farmer. Only our government and our major business and social institutions can really do

that, and their leaders don't want to cure the farm problems because they might lose their power or their wealth if they do.

"But with Farm Aid we at least took a step to say that a lot of people care what is going on."

Nelson has announced that he wants Farm Aid IV this spring, perhaps at the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, and a smaller fundraiser for farmers in March, in Washington, timed with the 1990 farm bill talks.

The Farm Aid operations have raised \$6-10 million, and through an ongoing office, have dribbled out small amounts directly to farmers, and paid the rest to telephone hot-lines and similar farm "counseling" services run by groups that are just fronts for the major international commodities cartels. These entities, in turn, interconnect with the money behind the entertainment industry that promotes a Willie Nelson.

Willie Nelson, with his concern for farmers, serves the same role of a high-publicity figurehead as the social-concern acts of other performers at the "Live Aid" benefit concert for AIDS victims, and the "We Are the World," for the benefit of starving Ethiopians. The concerns are always laudable, but the nature of the events is designed to never "rock the boat"—i.e., cure AIDS or grow enough food to feed all of Africa. Nelson expresses this very outlook when he writes, "The world won't be changed by treaties or summit meetings. Physical conditions can't change until our minds change. The sum total of the power of all the thoughts of all the people in the world is what will change physical conditions."

The wacko thoughts of Willie qualify him as an image-maker's delight, whether he is a good guy or a bad guy. Nelson is an advocate of every New Age kook idea going: reincarnation, karma, Khalil Gibran, the *Aquarian Gospel*. Nelson writes, "There's a part in the *Aquarian Gospel*, about the life of Jesus that tells where He went during the long period between His childhood and His last ride to Jerusalem when He disappeared. The King James version of the Bible was later rewritten to cover up the fact that Jesus had discovered reincarnation."

Nelson reveres the American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce (1877-1945), called one of the fathers of the New Age, who, in practice, was a classic con-man and kook who had his following in the Hollywood set.

In particular, Nelson oozes feelings about the "Earth as our mother." Nelson described his feelings when he was jogging one day in Texas: "When I see the destruction wrought upon our small planet by human beings who forget the supreme good of caring for our natural world that mothers us, I wonder if our species will last long enough to wake up to the truth that we must obey the old laws of cause and effect and treat the earth as our mother instead of as our gravel pit and garbage dump."

Nelson has been the perfect object for the entertainment mafia to put forward for various new twists and turns in the world of "country" music trends. In an August 1972 concert in Austin, Texas, Nelson was credited with combining the

tastes of hippies and "rednecks." In the 1980s, Nelson went into movies, television, and "crossover" songs and roles that are outside the "country image."

For most farmers, Willie is a joke. There's the farmer in Mississippi who says, "I keep going to my mailbox, lookin' for my check from Willie."

Developing a degrading 'popular culture'

What the lavish book *Country* provides, is an unintended picture of the context—the "entertainment industry"—in which scum like Willie Nelson could float to the top.

Country, with 700 illustrations, is a collection of essays by 16 writers that is designed to be an illustrated history of country music from the 1920s to the present. "Country music has switched from the backwoods to the fast lane. . . . 'Country' is the whole colorful, exciting, moving, sometimes eccentric history of backwoods ambition, country cunning, and big city business," reads the jacket on the 45 rpm put out to promote the book. The purpose of the book is promotion, pure and simple. Its encyclopedic presentation is supposed to encourage the reader to buy more country music, to go to Nashville, Tennessee and visit the Grand Ol' Opry, the Country Music Museum, and other sights, and to, generally, be a loyal fan.

A few of the chapters are well written and informative, for example, that by Ronnie Pugh, who is head of the reference department at the Country Music Foundation, which compiled the volume. Other chapters are unreadable trash, such as that by Patrick Carr, writer for the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*. He had perhaps the worst assignment in the book, to write a chapter called "The Changing Image of Country Music," which covered the trends and stars in country music from the 1920s through the 1980s as if they were all "natural" phenomena, and not manufactured by the powers-that-be in the entertainment world.

This coverup is the problem with *Country*. It rationalizes the fact that what is offered to the public as "country"-style music, is the selection of whatever the entertainment mafia chooses to make available. So the fan and the talented performer alike usually get the shaft.

Where has all the talent gone?

To take just one example. If you happened to enjoy the virtuosity of bluegrass and similar string music in the past, did you ever wonder why the market for talented string players like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs "gave out" around 1969? The reason is that the entertainment mafia in the late 1960s issued orders that "folk" was "in," and that traditional, virtuoso banjo and string playing was "out." To his credit, Lester Flatt couldn't make the transition to singing such false-folksy numbers as "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," and the Flatt and Scruggs duo broke up.

But *Country* doesn't give you the direct answer to these and any other obvious question you may have about the

history of “country.” You can only get the true history “between the lines,” which means that, at \$65, *Country* offers you very little for the money, except for over 700 glitzy photographs.

The true history of country music in the 1920s is sad, just like the sorry state of music in general in our century. Here are some of the facts of the matter, and keep them in mind when you reflect that President George Bush keeps a country music record collection at Camp David.

In the 1920s, when the advent of radio opened a new era of “popular culture,” the entertainment industry cartel of sheet music and recording companies moved to create and control new categories of so-called “authentic” subculture music. They concocted and labeled new “varieties” of music to peddle, including “country” (meaning, at first, mostly white performers from remote areas), and a category called “RACE” music (meaning black), and subcategories, including jazz and the blues. The control center was New York, with ties to London. This is the era in which the music moguls made names overnight, such as George Gershwin. The major companies involved were Victor, Okeh, Paramount, Columbia, and later, Decca, RCA, and others. The recording business, like Hollywood moving pictures, was the channel for organized crime money, and interconnected with liquor and dope running. The Kennedy family, for example, was active in RKO, a joint U.S.-British operation. The companies sent out scouts to record in Bristol (Virginia/Tennessee), Atlanta, Memphis, Charlotte, North Carolina. Some performers were brought to New York for recording sessions.

There was music to be found. There has been musical activity in the original colonies and the United States since the 17th century. Through such channels as the Moravian Church, and many individuals, there were transmission belts of great music across the Atlantic, including Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven. In the more remote areas of the Americas, some centuries-old music styles and instruments persisted, reflecting the different cultural patterns of the settlers. In the high Appalachians were the strong string traditions. In the Kentucky, Georgia, and Tennessee region were the harpsinging, dulcimer, and other traditions. In the Gulf states were the accordion songs of the Germans in Texas and the violin pieces from the Acadians in Louisiana.

As in Europe, such music (although generally banal in itself) frequently represented a decayed form of traditions harkening back to the troubadours of the Middle Ages and the polyphony of the Renaissance; and as long as the classical ideal was alive, so-called “folk” melodies had provided great composers from Bach to Beethoven to Brahms with raw material to be transformed into real music through the application of irony and the principles of lawful musical composition.

To subvert the potential of music to uplift the Americans, there were, repeatedly, dirty operations by political enemies of the United States against music—instead of composition,

de-composition. In the 19th century, the British conducted a campaign to “edit” and “modernize” Protestant hymnals, to remove the polyphony, and instead use sickly monotonous melodies. To counter the growing popularity of Verdi, Mozart, and other great operatic repertoire in the New World, there was a big push for vaudeville and Broadway show tunes.

In the 20th century, there were sophisticated operations by the music companies to create and promote the “jazz” of the Gershwins, and “country,” “blues” and the other so-called indigenous styles. The recording cartel decided who and what got recorded. The public and performers alike were victimized by these cultural warfare tactics.

In the late 1930s, the Radio Research Project intensified this process. Plots were hatched on how to create tastes for new forms of popular music, based on studies at Princeton and Columbia Universities, and on the work of the evil T.W. Adorno at the Frankfurt School in Germany. There were nests of collaborators in British Naval Intelligence—notably Lord Mountbatten—and in the U.S. Office of War Information, which specialized in psychological profiling. This network created the “Top 40” song charts idea of repetitive banality, which launched the postwar counterculture of rock music and drugs.

Racism and obscene lyrics

Right from the outset in the 1920s, there was an emphasis in “country,” “race,” and other new, synthetic music forms, on the most debased, depressive, or shallow themes. Reflecting the racist views of the blueblood cultural manipulators, the “black music” was the most extreme at the beginning for obscenity, drugs and misery (that is, the “blues”). In RCA Victor’s RACE project, the PR department offered as an excuse for the fact that black voices were sought out to record obscene lyrics, that this practice was “bringing colored folk into closer contact with their roots and the products of their own culture.” Bessie Smith’s recordings are characteristic: “Empty Bed Blues” and “Hot Dog Man.” “Kitchen Man” begins with the line, “His jelly roll is nice and hot.”

Black violinist George Morrison, who recorded jazz for Columbia, documents this process. He said that material was recorded and called blues and jazz that black families didn’t want their children to hear, but there was no choice. He described his own family experience, “Parents didn’t let their children play jazz. If you played Dvorak’s ‘Humoresque,’ fine, but if you played ‘Darktown Strutters Ball,’ that was awful. However, within a few years, the big companies overturned this.”

In the case of country music, the record mafia favored the “drinkin’ and cheatin’ ” style. Well-practiced violinists, mandolin players, and others who wanted to provide a positive concept in music either had to change their playing or accept obscurity.

The roving agent who specialized in “discovering” race

and country stars was Ralph S. Peer, who in 1920 took the position of recording director for Okeh Records. Peer first recorded the famous Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in Bristol, 1927. Later he worked for the Victor Talking Machine Co., which became RCA Victor. Peer was a cynical personality, who stood by and did nothing for years while Jimmie Rodgers—an early singing star—was failing from tuberculosis. Finally, in 1933, Rodgers, who had visibly overworked himself at a New York recording session, at age 35, suffered a lung hemorrhage in his room at the Taft Hotel and died a miserable death within 36 hours of leaving the studio. This was a scene to be repeated by dozens of the studio favorites: The case of Billie Holiday's death from drugs is well known.

Since the 1920s, each decade has been marked by a succession of synthetic styles promoted by the recording companies (hillbilly, cowboy, bluegrass, rock-a-billy), and also by a succession of ruined lives—of the performers and the public.

In the last couple of decades:

- Merle Haggard. Born in California in 1937, he spent seven years in reform school and three in prison at San Quentin, and began his career with prison and barroom songs. He sang the tongue-in-cheek hit "Okie From Muskogee" to ridicule patriotism, but it pleased President Richard Nixon, who had him sing at the White House. In March 1974 Nixon performed at the opening of the Grand 'Ol Opry in Nashville.

- Willie Nelson. When Nelson played at the Carter White House in the 1970s, he told the press, "My boys don't play where they don't smoke," and flubbed the words to the national anthem. He was deported and banned from the Bahamas for dope possession. A musical nothing, Nelson cultivated his bad-boy-with-a-good-heart-image.

Simultaneously with this degradation, the "wholesome" country image has been promoted through formats such as the "old-fashioned barn dance," insitutionalized today in the "Grand Ol' Opry." This is the Nashville successor to many local barn dance shows, which in the 1920s through the 1940s included talents representative of their respective regions. Over the years, the major recording companies muscled in to take control of these shows, as they took over radio and television. RCA and the big guns have had offices in Nashville for years to control the "country scene."

Just as this was all a *political* operation, it will take a political movement to free this nation from cultural enslavement—as Democrat Lyndon LaRouche, alone among nationally known political leaders, has recognized. What it will take is the rebuilding of a classical musical system, based on the heritage of Beethoven, through orchestras and choruses at the school, local, and regional level throughout the country, to give our citizens a grounding in the *science* of beautiful music. Once that is achieved, *no* mass media brainwashing campaign, no matter how well funded and persistent, will be able to manipulate Americans again.

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