

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Diane Pecknold.** *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 312 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4059-1; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4080-5.

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**Published on** H-Southern-Music (June, 2008)

## The Hillbilly Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate

In *The Selling Sound*, Diane Pecknold has written an impressive business history of country music that has important implications for the cultural and social histories of the genre. The book not only fills several gaping holes in the scholarship on country music industry which were once only spottily covered by journal articles, genre histories, and a few works of urban history, but also promises to become the standard account of country music business history.

*The Selling Sound* tells the story of the relationship between country music and commerce from the hillbilly radio barn dances of the 1920s to the controversy that erupted over the depiction of the genre in Robert Altman's 1975 ensemble film *Nashville*. Perhaps the most significant observation here is that, though audiences and the industry cooperated to win the genre respectability in the genre's early days, the country music industry sought only to turn the same audiences into a commodity that could be bought and sold to sponsors. Important here is the Country Music Association (CMA) which fiercely defended the genre and its audiences against accusations of hickdom until realizing that there was money to be made by marketing the same audiences with which it had once collaborated. Hoping to attract advertisers and to convince programmers to switch to the country format, the CMA not only insisted on respectability, but then re-packaged the country music audiences as upscale consumers, however accurate or misrepresentative such characterizations were.

Especially impressive are Pecknold's discussions of the origins of the CMA, Adlai Stevenson's unsuccessful attempt to woo the country music audience at the 1954 Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Day Festival, and the relationship between the commercial CMA and the academic John Edwards Memorial Foundation. Pecknold's account of the role of country music in the BMI-ASCAP scrap of the 1950s is one of the clearest and most complete I have read and her explanations of the related Cellers and Smathers hearings over "bad music" are illuminating and compelling.

More importantly, Pecknold's discussion of the role of fan clubs breaks important new ground in sorting out how notions about gender stereotypes affected the power relationships between fans and industry leaders. Fan club presidents, most of them working-class women, had once been welcomed members of the coalition to bolster the genre's image, Pecknold tells us, but were expelled from the 1970 disc jockeys' convention based on efforts within the industry to disassociate itself with negative stereotypes, such as that adoring women fans were drawn to "bad, 'schmaltzy' music produced by commercially constructed idols" (p. 208). Fan clubs regrouped and became a vital part of the industry's new Fan Fair, but never completely regained their former status.

The one area, if there is one, where *The Selling Sound* falls short is in its tendency to buy into the rhetoric that Nashville has created around itself, that equates the Middle Tennessee city with the history and origins of the

genre itself. Nashville is country music, and country music is Nashville, this line of reasoning seems to say, so why look anywhere else but the CMA and Nashville-based station WSM for the history of the genre or the industry? Pecknold might be forgiven this oversight, because her focus here is business, and much of the genre's business has indeed taken place in Nashville. This however does not negate the fact that, in the twentieth century, even industries are the products of migrations, communication advances, and transcontinental and transnational upheavals. Nor does it negate the fact that Nashville's status as the genre's industrial metropole was uncertain for much of the genre's early history.

Consider Hollywood, specifically, and California, in general. Missing here is the symbiotic relationship between the film colony and the early hillbilly industry in terms of the development of the country music image. Although some may have liked to have thought of country as "modern entertainment produced outside of Hollywood" (p. 52), as Pecknold contends, the reality was that the western and hillbilly guises of early performers were deeply indebted—if not at times directly connected, as in the case of the singing cowboy matinee idols—to the film industry, as Peter Stanfield and others have argued. (Even the later, sparkling, 1960s-era rhinestone suit that adorns Opry favorite Porter Wagoner on the cover of the

book was made in the Los Angeles suburb of North Hollywood.) Furthermore, the West Coast-based trade association, the Academy of Country Music, founded in 1964, receives no mention at all in the book, even though the book's chronology ends in 1975. This focus on the Middle South, perhaps, even led to a few glaring geographical missteps. Modesto is not, as the book contends, in Southern California, nor is Pueblo, Colorado, part of the urban North.

Pecknold remedies this monoregionalism a bit with an extensive discussion of the marketing efforts of Chicago's WLS Barn Dance and of how the country format radio was more or less invented in California in the 1950s, but even these examples seem to suggest that no one outside of Tennessee had a finger on what country music really was or what it should become.

Nevertheless, Pecknold's achievements here should not be understated. She has written a smart, compelling, well-researched book that is bound to energize scholars and serve as a resource for generations to come. Hers is the first to treat this hillbilly-country music business as a business and to study and explain it in a methodical, comprehensive way. It is the kind of book that, I can assert without much speculation, the current crop of new country music scholars might have wished had been around when we began.

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**Citation:** Peter L. Chapelle. Review of Pecknold, Diane, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*. H-Southern-Music, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14586>

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