

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Charles K. Wolfe, James E. Akenson, eds.** *The Women of Country Music: A Reader*.  
Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. x + 229 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2280-9.

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**Published on** H-SAWH (March, 2004)

## Gender and Country Music History

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Charles Wolfe and James Akenson's *The Women of Country Music: A Reader* is an interdisciplinary collection of essays with the expressed goal of exploring "issues related to gender in country music" (p. vii). The fourth in a series of essay collections on country music published by the University of Kentucky Press, *Women of Country Music* is the first thematically organized volume and incorporates the work of historians, musicians, and statisticians, as well as professors of music, English, and education.

Unfortunately, the essays in *Women of Country Music* fail to cohere and suffer as a whole from unevenness in both quality and sophistication. The majority of contributors do not distinguish between discussions of women's lives and discussions of gender, while the information provided on the history of country music is attenuated and tends to assume some knowledge of the field on the part of the reader. As a result, the collection is unlikely to be of much use either to gender historians seeking to inform themselves on country music or to historians of music or American culture looking for a nuanced analysis of gender.

There are some bright spots. Kristine McCusker's essay on musician Rose Lee Maphis, by far the best in the book, discusses the ways in which cultural changes shaped the performance strategies of country musicians. Theorizing that the barn dance radio format marketed traditionalism and sincerity as its primary commodities,

McCusker illustrates how performers, male and female, were expected to package themselves accordingly. Ironically, she suggests that this may have enabled women to better combine career and family life, since childbearing served the traditional image. However, McCusker argues, this image also necessitated stringent controls of "immoral" behavior, controls that weighed more heavily on women than on men. Additionally, McCusker provides contextual information on the development of the country music industry useful to readers unfamiliar with this portion of the story.

Editor Charles Wolfe's moving piece on Roba Stanley demonstrates Wolfe's grounding in country music scholarship and is largely successful at illustrating Stanley's significance to the field. However, Wolfe's exploration of the relevant gender issues lacks the same sophistication, and he fails to contextualize Stanley's career effectively by noting the changing gender norms of the 1920s that may have affected the public reception of her music. Rebecca Thomas's piece analyzes the ways in which southern racial norms shaped the race and gender history of country music and served to limit the role of black and white female artists in the genre. Although Thomas mobilizes a somewhat simplistic understanding of idealized white womanhood to prove her thesis, her interpretation of the creation of "pure" country music and the consequent amnesia about the explicit sexuality of early contributors to the field is fascinating.

A number of the essays in the volume appear to be

targeted almost exclusively at readers interested in country music history and, while informative, have little to say about gender with reference to their subjects. Tracy E. W. Laird's piece offers substantial information about the role of Shreveport, Louisiana, in the development of the country music industry and certainly mentions the intertwined careers of two prominent female performers, but contains no evident gender analysis. Michael Ann Williams's essay on music promoter John Lair offers a tantalizing reference to Lair's self-conscious construction of an idyllic family environment with his *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* program but does not go on to suggest why this family ideal might have sold so well in the 1940s.

Jocelyn Neal's close textual analysis of Faith Hill's songs engages in a debate, unfamiliar to those outside the discipline of country music history, about whether Hill is an "auteur" or simply a "metteur en scene." Neal spends the majority of her piece arguing aggressively for auteur status. Treatments of female country music performers in Canada and Australia serve to broaden the geographic range of the volume, but do little in the way of comparative work with gender.

Other essays are more problematic. The first piece in the volume, Wayne Daniel's discussion of vaudevilian Polly Jenkins, is primarily a chronicle of Jenkins's career, including references to the venues at which she

performed and the various performers with whom she shared the stage. Daniel fails to address the most obvious questions that come to mind with reference to Jenkins's significance, either to country music or to gender history. Readers do not learn about her stylistic influences, how she might have contributed to the transition from vaudeville to radio and television performance, or how her performance either reflected or contributed to the changing gender norms of the period.

Ellen Wright's essay on Roni Stoneman exhibits the same tendency to report uncritically the events of the subject's life and career, while Kathleen Hudson's interview with two female musicians from Texas is poorly contextualized and thus difficult to place in the larger narrative of the volume. Gloria Nixon-John's meditation on Bronwen Wallace and Emmylou Harris fails to establish a connection between them and seems out of place in the collection.

While *Women of Country Music* contains a significant amount of good raw information, it suffers from a lack of focus and a poor sense of its intended audience. The result is a haphazard, and occasionally very problematic, volume that does not result in any synthetic vision of the ways in which gender norms were affected by, or reflected in, country music.

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**Citation:** Margaret Nunnolley. Review of Wolfe, Charles K.; Akenson, James E., eds., *The Women of Country Music: A Reader*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9091>

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