

Bakersfield: Western

One hundred and ten miles north of Los Angeles along Route 99, Bakersfield, Calif., is more and more coming to be known as "Little Nashville." Compared to Tennessee's Music City, Bakersfield is a small town. In terms of country music, however, the nickname hardly approximates the magnitude of the oil town's contribution. Bakersfield is currently the site of one of the most successful guitar factories (Mosrite) in the U. S.; two of country music's hottest publishing companies (Blue Book and Owen Publishing); a flourishing country artists' bureau (Omac); at least one top-notch recording studio (Gary Paxton's); a full-time country music station and many clubs and record labels. It is the home of a score of outstanding country and western songwriters and performers, including Merle Haggard, a country chart topper, as well as the man who has been No. 1 for the past five years, Buck Owens.

Bakersfield folk are not happy with the "Little Nashville" designation, well-deserved though it may be. And they are not pleased when "Country and Western music" is telescoped to "country," regardless of whether the reasons are unconsciously conceptual or merely typographical. They feel that Bakersfield and Western music are sui generis, even though they might prefer a less Latinic phrase to suggest their individuality and legacy.

Unquestionably, the identity of much of country music stems from Western images. Nevertheless, it is a well-established fact that Nashville and the "Grand Ole Opry" have never been receptive to, if they have not actively opposed, western swing. "Yet through the back door," as Robert Shelton observes in "The Country Music Story," "much of the dress, manners and more importantly, the stylistic devices of Western music have all but eclipsed the original mountaineer nature of commercial country music." Small wonder that the West should feel resentful of Southeastern dominance of the field and its grudging acknowledgment of the West's contribution.

Small wonder then that in recent years, many of the westerners have begun actively working to correct the balance sheet. While many of them are loyal members of the Country Music Association, with offices on Music City's 16th Avenue South, they have established an Academy of Country and Western Music whose locus is Los Angeles. One of the members of the Academy board, incidentally, is Nudie Cohn, a North Hollywood tailor, who has for decades fashioned the elegant western outfits worn by Nashville performers. The Academy has begun giving annual awards for Best Country Record, Best Country Duo, etc., and it will come as no surprise that westerners tend to carry off most of the prizes.

Not unlike New York City and the country at large, few of Bakersfield's music partisans were born or raised in the town whose population has not yet passed the 100,000 mark. Buck Owens, the town's celebrated music citizen, was born in Sherman, Tex., grew up in Mesa, Ariz., and did not move to Bakersfield until 1951. None of Owens' Buckaroos or Merle Haggard's Strangers are natives of the oil town. They were from Oklahoma, Texas, and from Arizona, Missouri, Washington and California—which is probably a good cross-section of the origin of Bakersfield residents. Among noted performers-writers, practically the only Bakersfield native is Merle Haggard. Fuzzy Owen, who manages Haggard, was born and reared in

Conway, Ark. And Jack McFadden, Buck Owens' personal manager and head of Omac Artists, hails from St. Louis, functioned in Stockton, Calif., for a period, and did not settle in Bakersfield until the early '60's.

The rise of Bakersfield on the country music scene goes back to the late 1940's and apparently may be traced to the influence and personality of a country disk jockey named Bill Woods. From 1947 on, Woods worked as a platter spinner on local station KAFY. He also had the first country radio show in the area. On Saturdays his Orange Blossom Play Boys regularly broadcast over KPMC. Buck Owens, who worked for Woods from 1951 to 1958 as guitarist in the band at the Blackboard, a local nightclub, not only acknowledges Woods' pioneering role, but credits him with helping shape his highly successful "buckaroo" singing style. Tommy Collins and Ferlin Husky were two of the earlier Bakersfield artists to receive national acclaim after starting their careers in the oil town. In recent years, until an accident on the Bakersfield Speedway slowed him down, Woods has been more interested in automobiles than in guitars or record turntables.

Another pioneer of the area was Jimmy Thomason, who started as a sideman with Jimmie Davis, writer of "You Are My Sunshine" and a former governor of Louisiana. Thomason tried to walk in the footsteps of leader Jimmie Davis when he made an unsuccessful bid to become a California senator. But in the early '50's, he had highly successful country deejay shows on both KAFY and KERO. Later, he had the first live local TV show on KAFY-TV, a program that featured such Bakersfield veterans and emigres as Tommy Collins, Wanda Jackson, Bonnie Owens, Fuzzy Owen and Jean Shepard. Thomason currently is host of the only live country TV show west of Nashville, a program originating on tune-mfr's., channel 23 in Bakersfield.

Still another mover in the early days was Herb Henson, who first worked for Woods, and then had an extremely popular five-day-a-week show on TV known as "Cousin Herb's Trading Post Show." The "Trading Post" remained in business steadily for 10 years. Henson's popularity was so great that when he became manager of station KIKK, a post he held from 1960 until his death in 1963, the station changed its call letters to KUZZ (after Cousin Herb). It also switched its programming format from the Big Band sound to country music.

Bettie Azevedo, a prime mover in the formation of the Academy of Country and Western Music, served as assistant manager of KUZZ during Henson's tenure and following his death, as manager until July 1966. Secretary of the Academy from its founding in September 1965. Mrs. Azevedo is now a director representing the promotion category, and personally handles promotion for Merle Haggard and the Strangers. Fuzzy Owen, who runs Owen Publications and manages Haggard, became a regular on Henson's "Trading Post Show" when it started in '53 and remained with it as steel guitarist and vocalist until Henson's death. Just about the time he became a Henson regular, Fuzzy started Tally Records with his cousin, Louis Talley, whom he later bought out. In 1963 the small label launched the careers of Haggard and Bonnie Owens, and in 1966, of Bobby Austin ("Apartment No. 9"), all of whom moved from Tally to Capitol Records. A