

FLIPSIDE BLACKS SING COUNTRY MUSIC

By ARNOLD SHAW

On the recent release of Jackie Thompson singing "Daddy Sang Bass," Columbia Records ran a full-page ad, "Remember Carl Perkins wrote it," the copy read, "and the great Johnny Cash turned it into a country hit. Now, Jackie does it in a soulful rock version with lots of style, lots of truth and a lot of heavy soul."

Apart from the quality of Thompson's platter, what mattered was that his record was a *black* cover of a country song.

Unquestionably, this is a less frequent occurrence than the reverse. Both in its origins and in its various manifestations, rock is white singers adapting to or working in a black tradition. And if we go back a bit in pop music, the minstrel show, ragtime, dixieland and swing are all instances of styles originated by black performers and copied, adapted and/or enhanced by white.

At the moment, there are at least two black singers who have built their record careers on white material, specifically white country material.

Joe Tex is associated with Dial Records, the record arm of Nashville's Tree publishing company. Tex's disks are produced by Tree's Buddy Killen. Since 1965 they have regularly made r&b charts, usually in the Top Ten, and occasionally as No. One: "I Want to Do Everything for You" in '65 and "Sweet Women Like You" in '66, as well as sides like "Hold What You've Got" and "A Good Man's Hard to Find."

Although Tex has six LP's on the market, the character of his work was given no explicit identification until "Soul Country," as his next-to-the-last album was titled.

RCA's Charley Pride, who also has six LP's on the market, called his second, "Pride of Country," and his fourth, "Make Mine Country."

In a sense, the emergence of these two country-oriented, black singers cannot be considered novel. In 1962 soul-singer Ray Charles took a country ballad, previously a country hit for Decca's Kitty Wells, and made a No. 1 smash of it on Pop and r&b charts. The impact of Nashville-writer Don Gibson's song "I Can't Stop Loving You" was so great that ABC released two Ray Charles LP's whose contents are suggested by their titles: "Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music."

The exploitation of country material by black artists goes much further back. Way back, in fact, to the r&b era of the '40s. When he first went into record making, the late Syd Nathan of Cincinnati released disks on two labels: Queen for 'colored artists' and King for 'hillbilly singers.' Simply as a matter of smart business, when Nathan had a hit on Queen, he cut it on King, and vice versa.

"What Joe Tex and Charley Pride are doing is hardly new," Henry Glover, Nathan's a&r chief, recently observed. "And it wasn't new when Ray Charles went the country route. Maybe because we at King worked with white country singers as well as black r&b artists, it seemed a natural thing to cross boundary lines. We weren't afraid of intermarriages."

"Syd Nathan had me record blues with country singers like Cowboy Copas and Moon Mullican, and I cut country songs with shouters like Wynonie Harris and Bullmoose Jackson. Why, 'Mr. Blues,' as Wynonie was called, had one of his biggest sellers in a cover of a Hank Penney song and record, 'Bloodshot Eyes.' And Bullmoose had a big platter on a country song 'Why Don't You Haul Off and Love Me,' cut originally by Wayne Raney."

Ranging through records of the past twenty years, one finds a number that started as country hits and were later transported into the r&b field. In 1954 "Release Me" was a top country seller, with recordings by Ray Price on Columbia, Jimmy Heap on Capitol and Kitty Wells on Decca. Eight years later, it went to No. 1 on r&b charts on a Lenox disk by Little Esther Phillips. In 1961 Solomon Burke had a strong Atlantic record on a song called "Just Out of Reach (Of My Two Open Arms)." The heartbreak ballad saw the light of day originally on an obscure country record.

With these instances, and many others that could be cited, why should black use of white material be a subject for special notice? The question is analogous to the query: Why do white heads turn when a black man walks by arm-in-arm with a white girl? In a segregated society, the mixing of color (and apparently even the mingling of musical material) is inescapably an item for conversation or comment.

There is something more basic than shock value involved. When Chuck Berry first approached the Chess Brothers of Chicago about a recording session in '55, he brought with him a song that he called "Ida Red." It has been described as a country takeoff and Berry's guitar style—you can hear it on his "Golden Decade" album—surely had country overtones as well as blues figuration. Now, this should occasion no surprise since Berry was a southerner from St. Louis, Missouri, and could not possibly have avoided hearing the Grand Ole Opry from nearby Nashville, hillbilly programs from the Ozarks, and country performers over WLW out of Chicago, etc. After all, radio was rather white in the '30s when Berry was growing up.

What a man hears and what he experiences are, of course, two different matters. And Berry's experiences, like black southerners generally, were vastly different from those of the men who created hillbilly song. In its origins, country music evolved from a wasp tradition. (I am not using the term politically or emotionally.) It was based on folk-ballad literature imported from England, Scotland and Ireland by immigrants who settled in the mountainous regions of the middle-and-southeastern United States, who brought jigs and reels played by swirling fiddles with them, and who were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and not to overlook an even more basic consideration, free citizens. The Negro tradition was, by contrast, African, based on drums speaking a polyrhythmic language, and evolving from the tough experiences of a people enslaved, and as "free men," segregated, debased and misused.

In short, the singing of country material by a black man represents a merger of two completely contrasting, if not conflicting traditions. (More so than when a white man sings black material.) Black nationalists are doubtless not too happy about this adaptation of an alien tradition. But that black singers are today relaxed about working with material from an opposing musical tradition can be taken as a sign of the new sense of dignity, self-respect and confidence that they feel about the future.

THE STATE OF BLUES WEST COAST STYLE

By ELIOT TIEGEL

To a number of observant eyes the blues idiom is in a transitional period, rife with contradictions, yet overwhelming in the number of new, contemporary groups which are blowing blues music and firing up the emotions of young people around the world.

The once ethnic music found on "race records" is today being explored and exploited by whites and blacks together and this amalgamation of efforts is turning popular music into a strongly blues-dominated field. The analogy is found in recalling that the swing era sounds of the jazz and quasi-jazz bands of the 1930's and '40's became the popular music of that time period.

Today, with Ray Charles and the Supremes considered pop acts, not r&b in nature, the blues or soul field is crammed with people and styles which reflect both the old evergreen concepts for the blues and a more modern form of expression.

Roster of Labels

Where once it was the labels like Specialty or Alladin or Modern which fought the great battle for acceptance for r and b material, today the roster of labels recording blues runs impressively long.

In California, Arhoolie in Berkeley is the leading exponent of the pure, rural sound. Arhoolie fortunately is gaining a shot in the arm from two aggressive Los Angeles recordmen, Bob Krasnow and Don Graham, who have signed a distribution pact with Arhoolie's

owner Chris Strachwitz to repackage and distribute his marvelous catalog of gutbucket, roots music.

"Most blues cats wouldn't change their lifestyle to cut another form of music," states Bob Krasnow, "even if they were told the record would be number one. Most blues cats wouldn't care if it was number one. You can't have the blues and be a millionaire. It's a lifestyle you have to be content with."

At this point in the record business, blues artists are gaining a great amount of exposure which, of course is providing them with the big money they have never seemed to be able to earn from the power structure which has controlled the live talent booking industry.

In fact, there is now a black talent booking agency, World-wide Productions which has become quite successful promoting concerts around the Los Angeles area, specializing in Motown acts, but sprinkling in enough funky soul to satisfy all aficionados. The firm has been in business over two years.

Specialty Records, which has been dormant for many years is now in a reactivated state in Los Angeles. Its roster has included such singers as Little Richard, Sam Cooke and Larry Williams.

While Specialty will be reintroducing musicians and styles which are somewhat dated, Blue Thumb is going after new blues artists. It has just recorded the Chicago Blue Stars which this week was appearing at the Ann Arbor, Mich., blues festival. The sextet is working on its first national playing tour, blending in rock clubs like the Scene in New York (Aug. 12-13), the University of Massachusetts in Boston (Sept. 7), and the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco (Sept. 8-13). All told there are 15 dates on its tour, and the label will have its LP out to coincide with the first in-person exposure.

Blues Updated

Again, in the small blues label field, Venture, Tangerine and Fantasy's blues operation in Oakland, are all active. Motown has its eyes on a strong Los Angeles base and tradesters are peering around the corner for the first sign that Los Angeles will take on a greater meaning for the heretofore Detroit headquartered company.

The straight 12-bar blues has its audience, and once the market for a particular brand of blues has been ascertained, the wise record company knows how to promote in that area. This straight 12-bar brand of blues has been reportedly having some trouble at the r&b radio station level. According to one record executive, the r&b stations say they were playing the pure blues forms 20 years ago and now they look for something more updated. Maybe with a trumpet section and a roaring electric bass and conga drum.

Such artists as Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, Albert King, have all remained pretty much in the traditional style of singing and working with "standard" type of blues songs.

The underground FM stations have had a great deal to do with exploiting new and the vintage blues music, especially on such stations as KPPC and KMET, in Los Angeles and KSAN in San Francisco. Vault Records, which has principally been a jazz and rock label, has begun recording blues artists. Owner Jack Lewerke brought Lightnin' Hopkins into his own studio and cut the first new LP the veteran singer has done in over two years, "California Mudslide" and "Earthquake."

The LP was produced by Bruce Bromberg, a young blues buff, and the company has an option to cut followup material. Hopkins, whose works are spread over the catalogs of many companies, has remained in the traditional vein, with such songs as "Los Angeles Blues," "Easy on Your Heels," "Jesus Would You Come By Here," "No Education," "Los Angeles Boogie," and "Call On My Baby."

Vault has also recently released two other blues titles, "Blues Organ" by James Caravan and "Feelin' the Blues," by the Chambers Brothers, recorded before the group shifted to Columbia. Vault has culled a single from this LP, "Just a Closer Walk to Thee," the traditional spiritual. Traditional blues vocalist Papa Lightfoot will shortly join Vault's blues catalog once the company finishes recording him in Memphis.

At Capitol, Dave Axelrod, Phil Wright and Wayne Shuler lead the parade of in-house staff producers cutting r and b oriented material.

Black Culture

The company is also into a full-fledged program of promoting black culture and its performers, both through hiring blacks and by working with r and b companies. Rick Hall's Fame Records of Muscle Shoals, Ala., is a top prize Capitol is distributing.

Axelrod as the senior producer is the man to watch. He works with Lou Rawls, Cannonball Adderley and H. B. Barnum. "I've been making blues records all my life," Axelrod says. "I've never stopped. Now everybody is jumping on it. But a producer has got to

Continued on page S-6