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 C.J. Perkins Wrote It," the story read, "and the great Johnny Cash turned it into a country hit. Now, Jackie does it in a soulful rock version with lots of lowdown, low-register 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, there is a whole range of inter-related 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 had a big hit on an entirely white material, specifically white country material.

Joe Tex is associated with Dial Records, the record arm of Alabama's Trotter Publishing company. Tex's hits are produced by Tee's Buddy Kilian. 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 Young's "In '66, as well as sides like "Hold What You've Got" and "A Good Man's Hard To Find".

Although Tex has not been in the market, the character of his work given no explicit identification until "Soul Country," as his next-to-the-last album was titled.

B.C.A.'s Charley Pride, who has also six LPs 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, but black singers cannot be considered novel. In 1962 soul-singer Ray Charles took a country ballad, previously a country hit for DeeDee's Kitten Wells, and made a No. 1 R&B hit. The impact of Nashville-writer Don Gibson's "I Can't Stop Loving You" was so great that ABC released two Ray Charles LPs whose contents are suggested by their titles: "Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music." The exploitation of country material by black artists goes much farther back. Way back, in fact, to the era of the 40s. When he first went into record making, the late Syd Nathan of Cincinnati released discs on two labels: Queen for "colored artists" and King for "hillbilly singers," simply as a test of market response, 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/c 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 artists, it seemed a natural thing to cross boundary lines, and it was all the better to show that they worked, too."

"Syd Nathan had me record blues with country singers like Cowboy Copas and Moon Mullican, and I cut country songs with shouters like Wynongie Harris and Bullmoose James. When Mr. Blue, as Wynongie was called, had one of his biggest sellers in a cover of a Hank Penney song and record, 'Bloodshot Eyes.' And Bullmoose James did 'Don't You Have Off and Love Me,' cut originally by Wayney Raye."

Ranging through the 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 7 hit, as "Mr. Blues," as "Bobby Blue," as "Mr. Blues," was cut by Wynongie. And in 1961 Solomon Burke had a strong Atlantic record on a song called "Just Out of Reach (Of My Two Left Arms)." The heartbeat ballad saw the light 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 inexplicable an item of curiosity or interest.

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 he had called "Tide Red." It has been described as a country takeoff and Berry's guitar style—you can hear it on his "Golden Decade," album—had country overtones just as blues, too. It has been described as a country takeoff and Berry's guitar style—you can hear it on his "Golden Decade," where he worked with fiddlers with whom he were, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and not to overlook an Americanized, perhaps more involved, fee.

The Negro tradition was based, primarily, on drums playing a polyrhythmic language, and evolving from the Black tradition. This country tradition can be taken as the sign of the new sense of dignity, self-confidence and respect that they feel for the future.

The State of Blues West Coast Style

BY ELIOT TIEGEL

A number of observers 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 hearts of a generation of the same age.

The once ethnic music found on "race records" is today being explored and exploited by whites and blacks and is the amalgamation of efforts is turning pop music into a strong and influential field. The analogy is found in recalling that the swing era of the jazz and the music of the '30s and '40s became the popular music of that period.

Today, with Ray Charles and the Supremes considered pop acts, not R&B in nature, the blues or soul feel is one of the most prominent and approach which reflects both the old slant of the blues and a modern form of expression.

Roster of Labels

Where once it was the labels like Specialty or Apex that held a majority of the blues records, there is today a roster of labels recording blues runs in impressive length.

The blues is the leading exponent of the pure, rural sound. Arhoolie naturally is gaining a hold on the arm from two progressive Los Angeles recorders, Bob Kranzow and Don Graham, who have signed a distribution pact with Arhoolie's owner Chris Strachwitz to repack 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 Kranzow, "even though they had the chance.

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 issue, not money issue.

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 seen before. It's a sign of the new wave which has controlled the live talent booking industry.

In fact, there is now a black talent booking agency, World Wide Promoters, who have been successful promoting concerts around the Los Angeles area, specializing in Motown acts, but in enough funk to rival the biggest arena. The firm has been business in two years.

Speciality Records, which has been dormant for many years, has a new generation in Los Angeles. Its roster has included such singers as Little Richard, Sam Cooke and Larry Williams.

While 1958, and the confluence of introducing musicians and styles which are somewhat dated, Blue Thumb is going after new blues artists. It has just recorded the Chicago Blues Stars which this week was appearing at the Ann Arbor, Mich. fair on the festival. The recording was made on its first national playing tour, blending in rock clubs like the scene in New York (Aug. 12-13), the University of Massachusetts in Amherst (Sept. 6) 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 a pub-on-person exposure.

Blues Updated

Again, in the small blues label field, Ventures, Tangerine and Fantasy's blues operation in Oakland, are all active. Metown has a string on a strong Los Angeles blues market, recording his corner for the first sign that Los Angeles will take on a greater meaning for the formerly Detroit-based 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 do business. The broad based blues has been reported having some trouble at the R&B radio station level. According to one record executive, the straight blues forms 20 years ago and now they look for something more updated. Maybe with a trumpet section and a courteous rock and roll style.

Such artists as Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, Albert King, have all remained pretty much in the old style blues 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 KPFK in Los Angeles, KSAN in San Francisco. Vault Records, which has been a jazz and rock label, has begun releasing a series of LPs, as well, which brought Lightnin' Hopkins into his own studio and cut the first new LP the veteran singer has done in close to ten years, "California Models" and "Earthquake."

The LP was produced by Bruce Bromberg, a young blues beater who has an option to put out any 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." "Would You, Would You, Would You Come By Here," "No Education," "Los Angeles Boogie," and "Call On My Baby." Hopkins also released two other blues titles, "Blues Organ" and "Feelin' the Blues," the charts, the Chambers Brothers, recorded before the pens were done, and then a single "Blues Organ" came from this LP, "Just a Closer Walk To Thee," the spiritual, and "Blues Organ" was done by the Hopkinson, which once the company finishes recording him in Memphis.

At Capitol, Dave Axford, Phil Wright and Wayne Shulder feature the band of house producer and two young producers.

Black Culture

The company is also into a full-fledged program of promoting black culture and its performers, both through hit recording labels with black and white material. Rick Hall's Fame Records of Muscle Shoals, Ala., is a top prize Capitol is distributing.

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

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