

Modern Country Radio: Friend Or Foe?

By PAUL W. SOELBERG

(Note: Paul Soelberg, a one-time RCA distributor on the West Coast, has for the past few years been associated with the Stoneman Family. Last year he joined with two others in forming the firm of Bean, Murphy and Soelberg, which is a management company dealing with country artists. Here he voices his views on a perplexing problem.)

With thousands of country music radio stations leading the charge, country music has swept out of the hills and around the world. No longer saddled with a "barnyard-and-cowbells" presentation, it's now showcased in a fashion acceptable to massive numbers of urbanites.

It's another example of two closely related industries helping each other move toward maturity. But there's an age gap involved and, possibly, it's causing problems.

A formidable industry in its own right for over 50 years, country music has had ample opportunity to become an honest-to-goodness art form complete with its own history, traditions, creative sub-structures, and devout students and fans. "Modern" country radio, however, is practically an infant in comparison, since its tremendous ascendance didn't begin until the middle 1960's.

As broadcaster after broadcaster saw others' success stories and raced to convert their stations to country music policies, a tremendous demand was created for intelligent, well-trained programming personnel. Although many were brand new to the music, they all correctly concluded that it had mass-market potential, proving it by applying techniques used to successfully present other forms of mass-market music.

They emphasized their pride by promoting such terms as "countryopolitan" and "metropolitan country," augmenting these with others such as "All-American Music" and "The All-American Sound." Simultaneously, derogatory terms like "hick," "hilly-billy," and "kicking" fell into dis-use.

In the process, however, radio seemed to rigidly standardize, displaying little genuine creativity and individuality. Even in markets covered by three or more country stations, everything seemed to sound alike.

This pattern eventually exerted a tremendous influence on the creation of product. Many persons, fans and industry professionals, deplored the fact that the "guts" were being ripped out of the music.

Creators became uncomfortably aware of the new tight "formats" and the tendency to select for air exposure a narrowing spectrum of new product. Artists formerly reigning supreme dropped from the air; others briefly extended their lives by adding strings or brass. Entire country music sub-categories such as country gospel, western swing, or bluegrass, were judged by many new programmers as "inappropriate" and were summarily eliminated from programming.

Forgetting for a moment the abysmal lack of professional marketing skill that's handicapped the industry from its inception, the economics of country music are vitally dependent on getting air exposure for the product. As a result, product creators now must devote substantial attention to producing product calculated to appeal not necessarily to the fan, but to the new programmers now holding the power of life or death over new records.

While a wide range of product still is being recorded, most fans would never know it just by listening to the radio or by going into the nearest record store. Many country records—vast quantities of potential entertainment for dedicated fans craving it—are literally condemned to death at the moment of birth. Some product, from established stars, has a degree of automatic saleability even without air exposure; most of the rest can't get off the ground without airplay. In some cases, the death sentence takes the following form: "There just wasn't enough room on this week's playlist." Or, "I just don't think it'll sell."

Judge and Jury

Still, the professionals search for new ways to get their wares in front of the fan, supposedly the ultimate Judge and Jury. The dismal marketing picture is bad enough, but when the following obstacles are raised, the situation almost becomes hopeless.

(1) The Top-40-style format, with relatively short playlist, "comer" or "preview" list, both of which are based on "sales," imagined or anticipated.

(2) Re-circulation of the records on the above lists ad nauseum.

(3) Opportunity for exposure given to tiniest percentage of new singles.

(4) Very little attention given to albums (one, two, or fewer cuts per hour).

(5) Personalities who seem to feel obligated to yell at the listener.

(6) A select list of supervisors dominating the scene, performers whose records automatically make the "preview" list and then shoot to the top of "The Survey," where they remain for weeks.

(7) Many programmers, particularly those new to the music, who fail to grasp the significance of product (both old and new) and who are frightened of experimentation; if the product doesn't fit rigid preconceptions, it won't be played.

(8) Few programmers allowing themselves to take a "chance," preferring to wait for "chart action."

(9) The preoccupation with the pick syndrome, where everyone has to have a "pick" album or single, implying a sense of obligation to outguess or lead the fan and his peers down the path to Chartdom.

(10) Completing the job of duplication, the hourly "flashback" or "golden goodie."

With notably few exceptions, though they're fabulous exceptions, it's almost as if country radio has become a lot of followers waiting to see what the leaders are going to do. Programming individuality and creativity has yielded to a contest that reveals no more than who can pick Joe Superstar's record before anyone else.

Increased Base

Yet, the industry professionals know the base of the market is increasing. More fans want more country music, every kind of country music. But they're deprived not

only of opportunities to buy the music but also to hear it on their only other source—radio.

It's a major controversy.

If the public weren't indicating, directly and indirectly, various degrees of displeasure with the new common denominator, the industry creators probably would roll over and merely regard the new developments as inevitable evolution. But—

(1) Fan magazines receive great numbers of letters from irate fans deploring the "disappearance" of "real" country music.

(2) Fan clubs no longer hear their stars' recordings on the radio.

(3) Industry observers view with alarm the fact that Opry performers receiving encores after doing their new records for Opry audiences get no interest from many new programmers.

(4) Artists now excluded from "modern" country airplay continue to draw large (sometime larger) audiences for personal appearances. (Paradoxically, many stations no longer playing these stars' records book these same stars for their live package shows, knowing "they'll draw the crowds!")

(5) New "underground," free-form progressive-rock FM outlets in major cities now include traditional and "hard" country music in their programming, while the new "country (?) stations refuse it.

(6) Prestigious rock bands at the peak of international popularity apply the "hardest" of country music techniques—including the rawest fiddling and pedal steel guitars—to their most successful records.

(7) Colleges bring to their campuses country and folk-country acts whose records appear everywhere but on "country" stations, while these same stations complain bitterly that they're not "getting to the young people."

Each industry—broadcasting and music—has its own problems. While both industries depend on each other, each needs to solve its own problems, while showing genuine concern about the difficulties of the other.

Perhaps as a result of its closeness to the fan, broadcasting has gotten itself tangled up in the worst problem faced by the music industry: "sales." Some industry people, while grateful for broadcasters' concern, feel this might be harmful in the long run.

They question broadcasters' emphasis on "sales" of country records as a controlling factor in programming.

Wrapped in Sales

There are bitter, justifiable complaints raised daily by fans and professionals that country merchandise simply is not available in the stores. That is fact, solid and undeniable. It reflects a lingering stigma on the part of many distributors, salesmen, rack jobbers, field personnel, record dealers, and, most unfortunately, top record company executives.

Businessmen standing to gain so much instead become bottlenecks inhibiting the flow of merchandise from creator to consumer.

The effect on programming? Are "sales" reports valid evaluative tools if substantial quantities of merchandise are not available in the stores?

Columbia Records' national promotion manager for country music, Gene Ferguson, says, "Having programming so wrapped up in sales reports is almost a total fallacy. We talk to deejays about this constantly, because the reports can be inaccurate and because country music doesn't sell like Top 40 music."

Columbia's Nashville a&r manager, Billy Sherrill, adds, "I think it's possible to base programming on 'sales.'"

"I think programming should be based on listener response and reaction. If the biggest artist in the world comes out with a piece of trash and fails to get good response in a week or two, then the record should be dropped, regardless of who the artist is. Even the biggest artists and producers can make mistakes, you know."

Sherrill, who has produced some of the biggest country hits in the industry's history (Tammy Wynette, David Houston, et al.), continued, "Plenty of companies exaggerate about sales. If a record sold 30,000, a company will say it sold 100,000, so what kind of a basis is that?"

Sherrill's counterpart at Capitol Records, George Ritchey, himself a top West Coast (Seattle, Los Angeles) country disk jockey before his move to Nashville in 1968, adds, "I think many programmers, perhaps even the majority, don't know their markets, and they're not even aware of how important it is to know their markets. So they can't evaluate each record on its own merit, saying, for example, 'This cut might be good for the nighttime show here in this city, but I doubt it'd have much luck anywhere else.'"

"I've heard broadcaster after broadcaster say, 'We're not in business to sell records,'" Ritchey continued. "This is great, if only they'd live up to it. But too many radio stations are in fact 'in business' to 'sell' records. They want to go with what they think will sell, with what they think will sell, with what they'd like to sell."

He continued, "Broadcasters shouldn't be any more concerned with record sales than they are with selling cars or furniture. Sure, they should want to sell a lot, because that'll please their accounts and colleagues. That's good for everybody. And they should want to know comparative popularity of the various models (and records); that's valuable information. But more important than selling records, they should want to please their listeners. The records will take care of themselves, even if we do have our sales problems. But that's our problem, and it shouldn't affect the disk jockey or music director. They have enough to do."

Yet many programmers engage themselves in activities that really are of little significance for the listener. They fail to consider the logical possibility that a record sounds the same to a listener when it's No. 25 or No. 7. And when they drop a record merely because "it's not available in the stores," they've lost sight of their

(Continued on page CM-46)