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Classic Country: Legends of Country Music

Charles K. Wolfe
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Currently, country music is synonymous in most people's minds with Nashville. During its formative years, however, from the 1920s through the 1940s, the music flourished in towns and cities all over America. Talent sprang up everywhere and found its outlets on stage, records, and locally and nationally broadcast radio shows. While many regional performers and musicians ultimately found their fortunes in Nashville, many more exerted their considerable influence closer to home.

In this collection of biographical sketches—all but thirteen of which have been previously published—Wolfe profiles fifty acts, some famous, some obscure, and discusses the locales from which they sprang. Each act, he contends, had a significant effect on shaping the sound of country music.

Wolfe bases most of these profiles on his own conversations with the artists and/or people who knew them well. Among the famous performers whose careers he chronicles are Roy Acuff ("The King of Country Music"), Kitty Wells ("The Queen of Country Music"), Bill Monroe ("The Father of Bluegrass Music"), the Carter Family, Grandpa Jones, and Lefty Frizzell. All of these are now enshrined in the Country Music Hall of Fame. Lesser-known figures include the Rouse Brothers, one of whom wrote the fiddle classic, "Orange Blossom Special"; Jimmy Riddle, a regular on the TV series Hee Haw who perfected a rhythmic vocal noise he called "eephing"; and the elusive Georgia-born guitarist, "Seven Foot Dilly," whose story Wolfe spent years pursuing. Of particular value in these profiles are Wolfe's incidental remarks on the roles of radio, the "Victrola" phonograph, and mail-order records in popularizing country music.

Not all the book is given over to pioneer artists. The author also includes a section, which he labels "New Fogies," on performers who are still carrying on country music traditions, such as Doc Watson, Hazel (Dickens), and Alice (Gerrard), and the Freight Hoppers.

Because these pieces were written over a period of several years, it would have been helpful had each one carried its date of publication. Several subjects have died since Wolfe interviewed them, a fact he documents in his introduction, but one which is not always apparent within the articles.

Other of Wolfe's recent works on country music include The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling and A Good Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry.

EDWARD MORRIS (December 16, 2000)

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