

Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture

Aaron A. Fox

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Rarely has a student of country music imbedded himself as deeply and profitably in the subject as this author does. Fox first came to the little town of Lockhart, Texas—the site of this study—in February 1990. He says he was “seeking a great country music jukebox.” Then a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of Texas in Austin, Fox found a lot more than a jukebox. He also discovered a tightly knit community of blue-collar folk who congregated regularly at the towns shabby bars to drink, talk, and listen to and play country music. For these people, “real country music”—not the glossy Nashville stuff—is a surrogate heartbeat.

Fox observed and took notes at the Lockhart hangouts for a year before the locals learned that he was a first-rate guitar player who knew as much about country music as they did. After that, he became one of the tribe. He joined in the jam sessions at the bars and began playing in the ad hoc bands. This went on until 1994, when he completed his studies and left Texas.

Apart from the music itself, he was particularly drawn to the way the people talked to each other, the cadence of their language, the way they narrated and dramatized their stories, and the manner in which they wove country music phrases and attitudes into their conversations. Much of the book is devoted to reproducing and explaining these spontaneous bursts of speech and relating them to the larger context of country music, an art form distinguished by its rural—based and backward—looking ideals and its glorification of rugged individualism.

While this approach sounds very academic—and it is—it gave Fox the insights he needed to portray his subjects as emotionally complex people worth caring about. Reading the book is something like watching a production of Eugene O’Neils *The Iceman Cometh*—minus the plays enervating sense of despair. Fox is not so swept away by his new acquaintances, however, that he allows them to dilute or compromise his own values. When the first Gulf War began in early 1991, he was so put off by the racist remarks and knee-jerk patriotism he witnessed in the bars that he stayed away from them for “several months” before returning to resume his studies and friendships.

Fox is now an associate professor of music and the director of the Center for Ethnomusicology at Columbia University. His *Real Country* succeeds on two levels: as a demonstration to scholars of how art and life intertwine within and among the members of a small homogenous community, and as a prose documentary about proud people who have little but their music and each others company to look forward to.

EDWARD MORRIS (August 18, 2009)

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