



## Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene

By Travis D. Stimeling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). \$35.00 cloth. 192 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-974747-4.

One musical artist in particular built and transcended the limits of Austin's music scene during and after its Country Rock heyday. In the process and in numerous ways, he changed identities, morphing his musical genres ever-so-slightly on the surface, profoundly underneath. Michael Murphey rode into the sunrise from California, back to his native Texas and short-lived residence in its capital, as a Country Rock Rebel, which he remained for several years. Then, in prime American fashion, now as Michael Martin Murphey, he reinvented himself and became more of a stylish, modern country singer and subsequently America's main voice of Western songs. The picking (and the singing) became slicker.

The author of this volume, Travis Stimeling, a Millikin University professor of music history, approaches progressive country music through the critical lens of "music scenes" as defined by Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett—"situations where performers, support facilities, and fans come together to collectively create music for their own enjoyment." "Murph," as the personable Murphey now refers to himself, is far from the only major figure examined in this solidly written chronicle of Austin's 1972-78 "progressive country" period. Stimeling provides ample contexts for the period, discussing precursors whose roads inevitably led, at least retrospectively, to Austin's alleys. Such figures range from Jimmie Rodgers to Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys to Kenneth Threadgill, culminating in *Austin City Limits* and Willie Nelson's Fourth of July Picnics.

The author struggles most with understanding irony. Granted, he discusses at length how progressive country ultimately worked against and later defeated some of its own major ideology. But he opts to read the lyrics and hear the music of both "Cosmic Cowboy, Part 1" (Murphey's song's actual complete title, unnoted by Stimeling) and Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" literally, and as in conflict. Although the songs certainly represent views literally held by various artists and listeners on the opposing sides, Haggard and Murphey have claimed their intensions were ironic. A fact remains: these two songs—and others that entered and extended the same argument—can be listened to either way. Neither literality nor irony is necessarily mutually exclusive in any number of songs. Rather, each coexists lyrically and musically in them, creating fascinating tensions (for instance, Bruce Springsteen and Bruce Cockburn songs "Hungry Heart" and "Coldest Night of the Year," respectively). Successful irony—verbal or musical—demands seeming literalness.

Stimeling underscores idealistic battles featuring Austinites pitched against the country music industry and its flagship city, Nashville. His resulting discussion of redneck country, focusing on Haggard but including Austin folk-singer John Clay, proves

enlightening as Stimeling emphasizes redneck country's critiques of progressive country's Cosmic Cowboys. Yet he also convincingly argues that Bob Wills's "Western Swing" initiated expansion of traditional country's boundaries, allowing progressive country's further, more drastic changes. He additionally stresses how the inherent tensions at once proved creatively fruitful and revealed a wider cultural past by feuding about what the terms "Country" and "Texan" meant.

Almost completely, however, Stimeling curiously neglects moving into later years. For instance, he ignores the "Cosmic Cowboy" version from Murphey's 1979 *Peaks, Valleys, Honky-Tonks & Alleys* (unlisted in the Discography). This rendition drops "Part 1" from the song's original title and adds several significant lyrical changes and a different musical arrangement. It apparently signifies Murphey's transition to mainstream country, adding the bluegrass "Cosmic Breakdown" to the title and as ending to the song. This version is also a live recording, another important sub-theme the volume addresses.

Long on factual accounts and short on (though not devoid of) anecdotes that could have added life to its history—especially given the colorful subject matter—the book nevertheless provides interesting, though not fascinating, reading. Especially insightful is Stimeling's emphasis on radical changes progressive country initiated in music and Austin itself. Both grew rapidly, in the process destroying much of what progressive country celebrated most: a radical vision of freedom celebrated in an alternative, smaller town and in nature's open spaces.

Consequently, Americans again killed what they loved most. Presently, Murphey's concerts focus on his mainstream country and his Western music, their mythic values. Fine as so much of that music may be, Murph and Austin were far livelier, deeply more creative, swinging a lot more like Wills, during the years Cosmic Cowboys were riding in Geronimo's Cadillac, pining for Carolina. But perhaps it is true indeed that "You can only say so much and then you can't say anything more."

David N. Cremean



## Austin City Limits: 35 Years in Photographs

By Scott Newton, edited by Terry Lickona and Scott Newton, foreword by John Mayer, with assistance from Michael Toland. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) \$40.00 cloth, 204 pp. ISBN: 978-0-292-72311-5.

Austin City Limits (ACL) is the longest-running popular music series in American television history. Launched in the mid-1970s as a showcase for Texas regional talent, ACL has expanded over the years to embrace a wide range of American and international music. With its superlative production standards and intimate concert setting, ACL has achieved a legendary status in the music world and in the process has helped to establish the Capital City's reputation as a music capital. Since 2002, the Austin City Limits Music Festival has become one of the premier music festivals in the United States.

For more than three decades of ACL's history, house photographer Scott Newton has had a front row—and backstage—seat at the action.

Many of his photographs have appeared in two previous compilations: Clifford Endres's *Austin City Limits* (University of Texas Press, 1987) and John T. Davis's *Austin City Limits: 25 Years of American Music* (Billboard Books, 2000). The present 35-year compilation was assembled by Newton and veteran producer Terry Lickona, and features almost 300 color images of full-stage scenes, closeups, evocative details such as musical instruments and even shoes, as well as crowd shots, all of which only a photographer who attended every show with full access could create. Even the handful of black-and-white shots feature such iconic moments as a handshake between bluegrass legends Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley, as well as a stage full of legendary songwriters—among them Guy Clark, Emmylou Harris, and Willie Nelson—gathered to render their tribute to the late Townes Van Zandt. The photographs are presented in alphabetical order, from Arcade Fire to Willie and the Wheel, but really in no chronological or thematic order, thus giving further emphasis to ACL's eclectic mix. They are printed on heavy black stock that mimics the darkness that surrounds the dramatic scenes on stage and in a large format roughly the size of an LP record liner. The large format allows for two or three good-sized images of each artist for greater dramatic impact and detail.

This compilation is much more than a nice picture book for the coffee table. In selecting the "best of the best" from thousands of images, Newton and Lickona sought to move

beyond the photographic record to explore the significance of the ACL experience and the very process of making music. In his "Photographer's Preface," Scott Newton writes: "It's been my life's work...to photograph the musicians who have appeared on our stage, and to attempt to capture a sense of the invisible muses who move them." Newton found that muse in Jack White of the Raconteurs (2006), about whom he wrote: "Jack White has it. That thing called variously, charisma, stage presence, gravitas. The whole thing: riveting movement, powerful, piercing voice. Obviously, his body is inhabited by an immense soul." But the photographer confesses that his all-time favorite ACL show was Leonard Cohen (1988): "Deep and significant, his almost-painful delivery affected me like a sacrament, and I've never been the same since witnessing what a master can do."

For his part, producer Terry Lickona says in his introductory note, "[A]t its best, a photograph should capture you, the viewer, as well," likening the book to an interactive experience, where readers can compare their emotions with the ones that jump off the page. Some of the photograph captions feature similar insights by Newton or Lickona, but most telling are the statements by the artists themselves, taken from ACL's own oral histories over the years. They take the reader into the mind of the performers as they reflect on playing at ACL or pursuing their own muse. One of the featured performers, John Mayer, wrote in his own foreword: "[W]hatever I do on that stage, it's going to matter. The faces in the crowd will be preserved on tape forever...and I want their faces to reflect exactly how I feel: connected to the music, proud to be in the room, and proud to be in front of that Austin City Limits skyline."

This book will appeal to specialists—scholars, photographers, musicians, journalists, etc.—as well as the general public, which will include many long-time viewers of Austin City Limits. Everything about this volume and the artists it portrays reflects lofty standards of creative effort, whether it be the musicians giving their all to honor their hour on that special stage, the photographer seeking to capture their performances in transcendental images, or the layout designers at the University of Texas Press crafting an elegant publication worthy of it all. Spend a while with this volume and you will see that producer Terry Lickona is right about the emotional impact of Scott Newton's photographs: they do capture in that fleeting second the kinetic energy, the personality, the setting, the moment, and—dare we say?—the muse at work.

John Wheat



# Our Contributors

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is an Assistant Professor of Geography at Texas State University-San Marcos with research interests in sustainable urbanism and cultural geography. As a graduate student, he explored shifting narratives of California through popular music lyrics during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Additionally, Kevin and Julie Romig work with their three dogs, Lazarus, Moses, and Magellan, as pet partner therapy teams providing social and emotional support at local nursing homes, schools, and domestic abuse shelters.

## John Wheat

is Sound Archivist at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, where he oversees the Center's extensive collections of music and the spoken word. Wheat has written for *The Handbook of Texas Music*, *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, and other publications. A professional historian, translator, musician, and lecturer, Wheat brings a wide range of experience to his efforts in documenting the development of music and the music industry in Texas and the greater South and Southwest.