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


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 sunshine 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 intentions 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.”

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