

Kristine M. McCusker. *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 194 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0252075247. (pb).

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Kristine M. McCusker's book, 194 pages including endnotes, bibliography and index, is a valuable addition to Women's Studies and to the University of Illinois Press's series *Music In American Life*. In this book the author accomplishes exactly what she proposes in the introduction: to explain a revolution in musical taste that occurred during the inter-war period and resulted from the intersection of "historical trend" and "musical production." The "process" which facilitated this intersection took place when radio barn dance performers interacted with listeners to "interpret" their "fears, dreams, and wishes" (4-5). McCusker builds her narrative of performer-audience interaction not on the well-represented men of commercial country music, but on a group of lesser-known women, thus contributing to a different path for commercial country music research. The individual and collective contributions of the focus group—Jeanne Muenich (stage name Linda Parker), Lulu Belle Wiseman, The Girls of the Golden West, Lily May Ledford, Sarah Colley Cannon (stage name Minnie Pearl), and Rose Lee Maphis—were overshadowed by the men who managed radio, television, and the recording industry, and have been largely ignored by historians of commercial country music.

In the introduction to her book, McCusker dispels basic misconceptions concerning women in the commercial country music market. First and foremost of these is the notion that women were only securing places for themselves in the radio barn dance genre and not contributing to its creation and growth. She calls for a more balanced

presentation of the history of commercial country music, one giving women their due alongside their male counterparts. The author also takes exception to the idea that commercial country music and its female performers played mainly to a rural class of Americans. In her opinion, and as I have discovered in my own western-swing research, the music and its performers helped ease the move of displaced rural folk into the middle-class society they encountered in the urban areas to which they relocated in search of work during the Depression. Furthermore, McCusker notes that no matter how “rural” the onstage presentations, the business practices behind them were quite modern. The author also notes that performers of “old-time music” on the radio had motives other than self-preservation, including the confirmation of a morally healthy national culture and a unified national identity, especially during World War II. The author’s explanation of the reasons for white America’s distaste for “hillbilly” music and “jazz” is enlightening, with “hillbilly” representing over commercialization and “jazz” chaos. Consumers understood “Old-time music” to be genuine folk music handed down from British colonists.

McCusker also outlines her methodology in the introduction of the book; unlike other writers on the subject of commercial country music who simply ask who the performers were, she proposes to ask why these women were on stage and what effects their presence had on the nation and on commercial country music?

In the first chapter of her book, “Family Songs of Surpassing Sweetness, Vaudeville, Appalachia, Technology, and the Emergence of Barn Dance Radio,” McCusker provides a concise but detailed description of the precursors to and the context in which barn dance radio and ultimately commercial country music emerged.

Throughout the chapter she maintains the human-interest focus of her book by building

her narrative around performers, both females and males, who participated in the barn dance and commercial country musical scene. Following the introduction, McCusker assigns a chapter to each woman or group of women she uses to exemplify her major points. She then ends her book with a “Coda” that is more than a summary in that it carries the premise of her book into the present, or recent past, with references to Loretta Lynn, whom she identifies as “Barn Dance Radio’s New Friend.” In this way the author demonstrates that neither her narrative nor the significant influence of women ended with the decline of barn dance radio, but rather that “. . . the banjo pickin’ girl had metamorphosed into the Coal Miner’s Daughter and she was, once again, a national sensation” (151).

Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels is an intelligently written and humanly inspired book that adds considerably to current knowledge of country music radio and its place in the socio-cultural landscape of America in the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s. In researching this book McCusker discovered and utilized primary sources that have been ignored or overlooked, especially fan letters that bring a sense of real humanity to her narrative. Many of these letters are colorful and emotional, and illustrate the author’s argument that women were essential to the creation of the radio barn dance genre, and ultimately to commercial country music itself. The letters also reveal information about the audiences who listened to the barn dance radio shows, including the fact that some listeners had problems with particular performers for reasons pertaining to musicianship or the characters they portrayed. The author presents these women honestly, including references to what some readers will perceive as blemishes; for example, she does not omit the information that Sarah Colley Cannon (Minnie Pearl) was a states’ rights

advocate who supported George Wallace in his gubernatorial campaigns and did not support passage of the Civil Rights Act. Neither does the author ignore the fact that performers might eschew riches on stage in order to maintain their down-home genuineness, but pursue that same wealth off the air. McCusker delves deeply into the characters of the women about whom she writes, freely discussing their failures and successes and their psychological hang-ups. This is a wonderfully honest book.

In describing her methodology McCusker admits that the collective-biographical approach is problematic; it is one of the few weaknesses of her book. Such brief biographies leave the reader wanting to know more; however, McCusker's extensive bibliography provides a wealth of sources for further discovery. The chapter on Rose Lee Maphis, which is based in part on an interview that the author conducted with her, is somewhat frustrating. Maphis apparently had little to say in her own behalf, and the author was forced to fill in details from other sources and to incorporate the stories of other performers, thus rendering this chapter less focused than others in the book. Also, McCusker concentrates most of her attention on WLS Chicago's *National Barn Dance*, and only hints at the existence of other stations, such as WFAA in Dallas that offered local barn dance entertainment. This limitation makes sense for this book, and leaves open the possibility of further research into these other stations.

In conclusion, *Kristine M. McCusker's Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels, The Women of Barn Dance Radio* is a fine addition to research regarding women's contributions to American music. It takes an honest look at the significant place of women in creating barn-dance radio and ultimately commercial country music. McCusker's interpretations of American history and culture are pertinent, insightful and

beyond gender bias. McCusker's book is highly readable, at times humorous, and always full of human interest.