

music

this week's essential reading

'President Obama pays tribute to US folk singer Seeger, BBC

'Pete used his voice – and his hammer – to strike blows for workers' rights and civil rights; peace and environmental conservation. And he always invited us to sing along'

The heart of country

Nashville, Tennessee, is the most American of major US cities, in that it alone seems to aspire to such a status. New York fancies itself a global metropolis in a class all its own. Los Angeles and San Francisco are both more Californian than American, each in its own way. The Midwestern hub of Chicago would seem to be a good candidate, but the Windy City has a habit of characterising itself mostly by what it is not – not New York, not Los Angeles, not San Francisco. (It is windy – that much it knows.)

Nashville, for its part, sits invitingly in the south with an assured sense of self and a claim to a tradition that is as American as they come. That tradition is country music, and not just what country music has been but what it stands to be. It's a heritage-minded culture that is still very much breaking, bucking, alive.

The heritage is rich, as evidenced by the stupendous new two-CD set *Buck 'Em! The Music of Buck Owens (1955-1967)*. Owens, who died in 2006 at the age of 76, was a country-music traditionalist with a foundational demeanour and an elemental sway. That he wasn't associated solely with Nashville hardly matters: though he was a pioneer of the "Bakersfield sound" from Bakersfield, California, his spirit remains a mark of country music purity in the homeland of Nashville even to this day. Honky-tonks and bars there abound with his songs, drifting from speakers or played live by bands trying to commune with their roots. He's like Hank Williams, George Jones and Loretta Lynn – an immortal from a country-music lineage that is important.

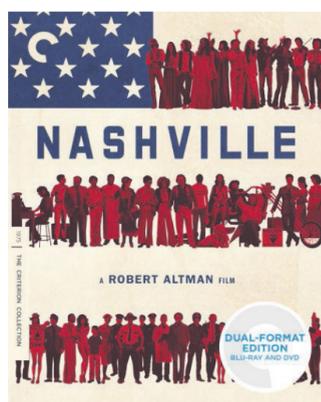
Owens owed some of his notoriety during his lifetime to *Hee Haw*, a television variety show that, beginning in 1969, did as much as anything ever has to introduce country music to the masses. Between comedic skits that drew on regional folkways and lots of hokey humour, some of the biggest acts in country graced its stage. It was a goofy trifle but also a serious showcase, with Owens as a host who mixed yuck-yuck, down-home charm with real country bona fides.

His significance as a musician is on fine aural display on *Buck 'Em!*,



The American country singer and Grammy winner Kacey Musgraves at the Grammy Awards on Sunday. Below, the classic 1975 film Nashville has been re-released on DVD. Kevork Djanszian / Getty Images

Nashville is enjoying a resurgence. New country artists are being lauded, the classic 1975 Robert Altman film about the city is being re-released and the iconic music of the legendary Buck Owens is showcased in a new two-CD set, writes Andy Battaglia



which finds him young and hungry at the beginning of his career. In a bit of autobiography excerpted in the liner notes, Owens writes of driving long distances between thankless gigs and finding new and surprising ways to bomb. "Things got off to a really bad start," he writes of his first major-label record deal, signed in 1957 with Capitol, "because my first few singles didn't even hit the bottom of the charts."

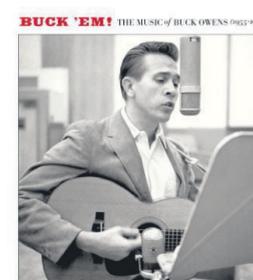
That doesn't mean they weren't great. The early tracks on *Buck 'Em!*, from that less-than-successful period, are classic country stripped down to its elemental form: twangy guitar, shuffling

drums, the slurry whirl of pedal-steel parts, some fiddle here and there. Owens's voice strikes a winning mix of live-wire energy in raucous songs such as *Hot Dog* (sample lyric: "Hot dog!") and glassy-eyed sadness in the likes of *There Goes My Love* (on the subject of a woman leaving him: "There goes the reason that I sigh / There goes the reason that I cry / There go the lips I used to kiss goodnight").

There are 50 songs on *Buck 'Em!*, and all of them earn their place, from his earliest hits (*Second Fiddle*, *Under Your Spell Again*) to later hallmarks such as *I've Got a Tiger by the Tail*. The set sounds so iconic and pure in its essence that

it's easy to forget that the sound of country music was still being developed as the songs in evidence took form. Owens was a musician of simple means – an artist whose modest, humble style hides its artistry in the interest of finding an immediate, communicable, everyman form.

The story of country music's changing ways figures into another offering from the vaults: a new release of Robert Altman's *Nashville*, a 1975 film that many rightly regard as one of the greatest American movies of all time. Its milieu is a city in the throes of country music and the many dreams and delusions it engenders: dreams of stardom and delusions of gran-



Buck Owens
Buck 'Em! The Music of Buck Owens (1955-1967)
Omnivore
Dh95

deur, plus all the dashes of hope and doom that attend politics in the country of country.

The film, restored by The Criterion Collection for DVD and Blu-ray, is epic and sprawling in its scope. "This was a movie. You couldn't call it anything else," says the screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury in a making-of documentary included with the set. She's right in that Nashville plays like a full realisation of cinema as a singular form, with riots of sights and sounds all jammed up against a rising chorus of interpersonal dramas and changing perspectives.

It's so riotous and so raucous that the music in it, ever-present and never less than stellar, makes up but one part of a churning world. "I don't think it's about anything, but it's about everything," says the actor Allan Nichols of Altman's panoramic vision.

The movie really is about everything, at least an American kind of everything. But its take on music alone makes it worthwhile viewing. No film has ever been so good on what makes music important and impactful – and full of illusions – to those who make it a lifestyle. Every character in the film has a song or act to hawk, and none is wrong in the hope that the right break or lucky chance could stand to change everything.

Many people in Nashville at the time were upset by what they took to be Altman's satirical skewering of their culture. But watched now, the film abounds with a special kind

of tenderness, in its attention to detail and its investment in a sense of place. Speaking of Altman in the documentary, the actor Keith Caradine says: "He could be saturnine in his darkness, but there was always a twinkle behind it." Nashville is the star of *Nashville*, and there's no way to watch it without wanting to go there and be swept up in its swirl.

Nashville these days is a swirl and then some. The American media is rife with stories of the city's current resurgence, which has come to include everything from a convention centre development to craft-beer brewing to updates on the city's fabled foodstuff known as "hot chicken" (chicken fried in a wild kind of cayenne-pepper paste). The city has a gleam about it, a sense of energy that is infectious.

The music scene is in fine form, too. The swelling year of 2013 centred on what the publication *Nashville Scene*, in its annual Country Music Critics' Poll, called "the most heralded crop of new country artists since 1986", meaning more than two decades have been bested. Leading the charge are three women, all of whom traffic in traditional country sounds and a shared devotion to the artfully, cleverly, evocatively wrought song.

At number three, Ashley Monroe made a sophisticated missive in her album *Like a Rose*. The number two slot went to Brandy Clark, a behind-the-scenes hitmaker for other artists who soared to wry and wizened narrative heights with her album *12 Stories*. At number one is Kacey Musgraves, who broke through to critics and audiences alike with *Same Trailer Different Park*. Among the conventional songwriting subjects she circles with a sharp and playful eye are economic hardship, lost love and clownish behaviour by dunderheads who are well-served by a little sassy dressing down.

Any of the three could have fared in eras ended long ago, but they thrive very much in the present, too. In that, they represent a tradition always looking out for new and rootsy ways to keep the tradition alive.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Spin* and more.

playlist

Four more American cities that are credited with fostering the development of musical genres

New Orleans

Jazz

In the late 19th century, this racially and culturally diverse US city was home to the unique convergence of the European classical legacy, European folk, African and Caribbean styles, and popular American music, which formed the basis of what was to become known as jazz. To this day, the Louisiana city is known as "the cradle of jazz".



Three Lions / Getty Images

Chicago

Blues

The guitarist Robert Johnson described the Windy City as a "sweet home" for the blues. The genre first took hold there when 1.6 million black people relocated to the industrial north from the rural south between 1910 and 1930. A huge audience and a growing network of clubs ensured its status as capital of the blues.

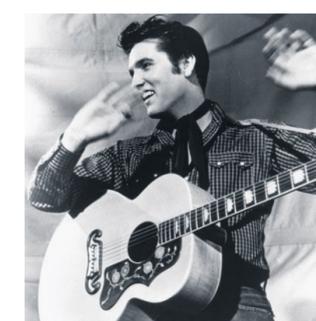


AP Photo

Memphis

Rockabilly

As well as spawning Memphis blues in the early part of the last century and Memphis soul in the 1960s and 70s, the music-mad Tennessee city is also synonymous with country, R&B, rock 'n' roll and, of course, rockabilly, which was popularised by singers such as Elvis Presley, right.



AP Photo

New York

Punk

Before the Sex Pistols and The Clash exploded onto the scene in Britain in the mid-1970s, New York served as an incubator for proto-punk bands such as The Velvet Underground, The Dictators and The New York Dolls, left, who cultivated their anarchic sound at louche venues such as Max's Kansas City.



Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images