

The Fusion of Country, Roots, & Jazz Music & Why It Is Relevant

It is hard to distinguish the many niches heard and discovered in music, especially in this day and age of technology and many different musical genres. That being said, the music that we hear, consume, and take part of is a huge melting pot of different cultures, idioms, niches, and variety. What is to say that two very popular, vastly changing, and age-old genres are different, or perhaps share similarities? In this paper, I will be discussing and theorizing how the processes and idioms of jazz and roots, americana, bluegrass and country music can—and have—mixed successfully with jazz idioms. I will also show how this blend is still taking place today in 2018 and continues to be a mix that works well despite what some musicians specialized in each one of these genres may think. As Dan Ouellette quotes Joel Harrison in his 2003 *Downbeat* article “The Question Is... Do Jazz and Country Mix?” “I agree with Joel Harrison, who responds to jazz aficionados who deride the country/jazz integration: ‘Purists are boring. They’re missing out on this astonishing coming together of disparate elements to create something new.’”¹ Ouellette and Harrison make a valid point, and it is important to notice the connections and positive

¹ Dan Ouellette, “The Question Is... Do Jazz and Country Mix?”, *Down beat* volume 70, no. 11 (2003): 26.

impacts that these musical fusions can create. Therefore the industry and listeners may be able to appreciate the new music born from this style of fusion.

There are definite positive and negatives to the combining of country, roots and jazz and it can depend largely the following factors: specific instrumentation used, as well as how each composition and arrangement works together to create a whole new musical fusion. Before continuing, it is important for me to define and point out what I mean by country and roots music. The music is part of a large body of work in old country and western traditional music, as well as roots in bluegrass and Appalachian music that is largely from an older era between the 1940's to the mid 1980's country music. As a delimitation of my study, I do not intend to discuss the current country pop scene that exists largely today based in Nashville. I will include in my writing pivotal members of both genres between this large two-decade time period, suggested and important albums that include these musical fusions, and important musicians that continue to push this musical fusion that still exists in 2018. The musicians that I will mention have been significant in this fusion between these two time periods as well as currently. They include the great professional guitarist, session star and leader of the Nashville RCA branch Chet Atkins, the late steel guitar extraordinaire Buddy Emmons. I will also include a specific album by the fingerstyle and seven string guitar maestro Lenny Breau, significant album recorded by since retired jazz master vibraphonist Gary Burton, and professional guitarist and highly regarded session musician, the late Hank Garland. Finally, it is important to include information and recommended pieces from the 2016 Grammy award winning release "Country For Old Men" by professional guitarist John Scofield. In the earlier days of country music and jazz being fused, the big propeller of this fusion was Chet Atkins, who oversaw quite a lot of musical sessions which I will include in my paper when discussing these albums, as well as insight about each session with album reviews, liner notes, and other evidence. I believe it is important to note that

many of these musicians have chosen specific pieces and musical works for this cross pollination, including musical works standard in bluegrass and country music such as “Faded Love” by highly regarded Western Swing musician Bob Wills, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” by the late, great Hank Williams, and “Wildwood Flower” by The Carter Family, to name a few. I will also be bringing to light the shift between country music stars playing just this fusion music, to them approaching jazz standards, bebop, and their own original jazz inspired compositions. These include masterful arrangements and playing by Buddy Emmons, and Hank Garland in particular that I will be mentioning. I have noticed through my research when looking at specifics regarding recording dates, and times of year that the date and specific time period have a lot to do with this musical fusion and mix. This goes hand in hand with record producers trying to create a larger body of musical works that can try to approach the success of certain records and concept albums as well as the public’s continued interest.

The influence of jazz on country music stars, session musicians, and string players is apparent when hearing many old recordings as well as through research on their musical influences. Today we see jazz musicians continually being influenced by old country music such as Bill Frisell’s bluegrass inspired record “Nashville”, and John Scofield’s Grammy award winning 2016 record release “Country For Old Men”, which I will discuss later in my paper. It is very crucial to understand the history behind this musical movement, as well as genres that were formed based on this mix such as western swing like Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. However, it is important to note that although western swing is a huge influence on the mixing of jazz and country music, this topic will not be the main focus of this study. The intention with this mix is to lend some insight into the history by discussing the music and analyzing exact quotes from primary resource research as well as suggested musical examples. David Wondrich of the New York Times sheds some light on background and furthermore history of the interest country

musicians had in jazz. As he puts it “ever since country music first began to make it on record, in the early 1920's, many of its musicians had the chops to play jazz; they were donning overalls and straw hats simply to pick up a quick buck. On their own time they wore suits, just like the folks in New York, and occasionally they even got to record the music they really liked.”²

Having an understanding of the background of western swing and how it has influenced the fusion of jazz and country music is important to note, as author Jean Ann Boyd points out in her book “The Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing.” “Record company executives of the 1930s and 1940s did not know how to classify improvisation created by country string bands, so they labeled it "hillbilly." But western swing musicians viewed themselves as jazz performers.”³ Boyd furthermore sheds light by bringing in an important jazz historian into her writing and states that “Gunther Schuller has spoken to the fact that western swing has simply been overlooked by the jazz community. He is on target when he provides the following description of western swing: ‘[It] was the most pervasive southwestern music of all, especially on radio, . . . with featured guitarists playing improvised single -note lines. These players also pioneered the electric or amplified guitar but have never . . . been given credit in any jazz- writing either for their jazz leanings or their efforts on behalf of guitar amplification. Players like 'Zeke' Campbell, Bob Dunn, and Leon McAuliffe were very much in a jazz groove and by the mid- thirties certainly far removed from any of the older guitar, mandolin, banjo vertical 'finger-pickin' country styles.’”⁴ This is highly important to note and useful in

² David, Wondrich, “When hillbilly and jazz found common cause”, *New York Times* (November 19th, 2000): AR29.

³ Jean Ann Boyd. *The Jazz of the Southwest : An Oral History of Western Swing*. Vol. 1st ed. Austin: University of Texas Press.
<http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=32465&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (1998): Chapter 1 page 6.

⁴Boyd. *The Jazz of the Southwest : An Oral History of Western Swing*. (1998): Chapter 1, page 7.

delimitating the definitions of these styles of music included in this study. Western swing pervaded into the ears and airwaves not only in the southwest but all over the rest of the United States. It inspired and influenced many country musicians, as it incorporated both western and country music sounds with tonalities of twang and fast tempos in more jazz styles. This was similar, in contrast, to fast, swinging bop changes and tempos. Boyd gives a great sense of background in establishing many of the ideas about how western swing began. She states “Western swing was a jazz style formed by the fusion of various ethnic musical elements found in the Southwest, predominantly in Texas. Western swing was, from the outset, dance music designed for the numerous dance facilities that dotted the landscape of Texas and Oklahoma. Western swing, like its Mexican *conjunto* cousin, was rural music, played in rural settings or for transplanted rural people in urban venues. Western swing rarely assumed fixed forms but varied from band to band, soloist to soloist, and region to region.”⁵ Just like any other musical form and idiom, the author points out the ways in which this music was heard and understood, which is an important part in understanding how many country musicians were influenced by jazz music, the process of improvisation, and call and response. “Western swing was played and sung in a manner consistent with popular music and jazz that was current in the late 1920s and early 1930s; and this was the music that was heard even by rural folk on phonographs and the radio.”⁶ This was the beginning of radio production and mass ways in which people could hear vast amounts of different music all over the United States for this first time through the early 1920s and 1930s. The evidence provided by Boyd is an accurate representation of the impact of this

⁵ Boyd. *The Jazz of the Southwest : An Oral History of Western Swing*. (1998): Chapter 1, page 7.

⁶ Boyd. *The Jazz of the Southwest : An Oral History of Western Swing*. (1998): Chapter 1, page 7-8.

music, especially based on both the peoples cultural and regional locations and socioeconomical background.

The correlations between where people lived, listened, and participated in music are highly important in understanding how and why jazz and country music first began to mix and fuse together. In the early 1960s there were seminal recordings done by some of Nashville's greatest session musicians, not so much as a fusion of country and jazz music but of Nashville country session stars approaching their own brand and arrangements of jazz standards and popular tunes. It is interesting to note that this shift between country stars interested in jazz tunes has reversed in many ways looking from the 1960s to the present with many jazz musicians reaching back into musical roots and influences in country music. I will now mention these important recordings, recording dates and reasons as to why they are pertinent as important recordings showing how jazz and country, roots, and bluegrass music are important and connected musical genres worthy of musical fusions. Hank Garland was one of these special Nashville guitarists, perhaps at the time in the 1940s-1960s, and one of the most recorded session guitarists at that time. He released one of his only jazz albums, which John-Frank Hadley from *Downbeat* magazine describes "The late country guitarist Hank Garland almost made it into this world with his strong bebop album, *Jazz Winds From A New Direction*, in 1960. The album featured then teenage Gary Burton on vibes, Joe Morello on drums and Joe Benjamin on upright bass. "In country, there's always been room for good guitar playing- from the time of Hank Garland, Chet Atkins and Jimmy Bryant on through to today's players like Brent mason", Jorgenson said. 'they're great musicians, and their interest spills over into jazz.'" ⁷ Some of the pieces Garland covers on this album that is included as recommended listening are the following:

⁷ John-Frank Hadley, "Bebop Hoe-Down: Jazz & Country Have Been Making Some Innovative Connections", *Down beat* volume 72, no. 12 (2005): 50.

the jazz standard classic “All the Things You Are”, with a highly melodic, Bach-like counterpoint as Burton plays the melody with Garland moving around him with these color tones and melodic lines. Another piece that this group does a phenomenal job with is the bop tune “Move” written by Denzel Best, which before then could be heard on the classic Miles Davis record “Birth of the Cool”. One of the most astonishing parts of this piece is Burton and Garland’s ability to play the melody of this piece in unison through the whole melody until Burton begins his solo. One word that would describe Garland’s playing on this phenomenal record would have to be smooth, if not some of the most fluid and clean jazz guitar playing, especially at this time. As John Hammond mentions in the liner notes of this record, “The last laugh may be on him [Producer Dean Law], if Hank deserts Nashville for the world of jazz.”⁸ This is a significant album for the listeners especially in country music and the Nashville area, showing that even as a professional session guitarist in the Nashville scene, Garland proved himself a formidable and expert musician with his interpretations of jazz.

Moving chronologically from Garland’s wonderful ground-breaking jazz debut in 1960-1961, the next musician who was a big part of the Nashville session music scene with similar achievements was steel guitar virtuoso, the late Buddy Emmons. Emmons began playing the steel guitar early in his childhood years and grew accustomed to the way in which the instrument was needed to be played. He was a natural. The history right before his first jazz debut album is important to know and understand, as well as get a sense of how the music business was interacting with an ebb and flow during this time. Writer Leigh Spencer of The Independent in London discusses Emmons career, in this particular period, “In 1962 Emmons became part of

⁸ Steven Cerra,. “Hank Garland: Jazz Winds From a New Direction”.
<https://jazzprofiles.blogspot.com/2014/01/hank-garland-jazz-winds-from-new.html> (Date accessed 12/15/18)

Ray Price's band, the Cherokee Cowboys, and found that Price was prepared to experiment. His bluesy playing on "Night Life" was highly unusual for a steel guitar and sounded wonderful. This led to his instrumental album, *Steel Guitar Jazz*.⁹ Ken Dryden reviews Buddy Emmons record "Steel Guitar Jazz" from the website Allmusic.com and has a lot of important and noteworthy points "Although both he and the instrument are indelibly associated with country music, Emmons makes it work for several reasons. He's surrounded by some top players, including Bobby Scott, Jerome Richardson, Art Davis, and Charlie Persip; he also interacts with the band rather than overdoing the special effects available to him, especially the horn-like sounds obtained from his use of the slide."¹⁰ For further information regarding other review and opinions this album, the NPR story and review by Jazz Critic Kevin Whitehead is a great place for information, and knowledge on the session, tunes arranged, and Whitehead's musical opinions. Some noteworthy pieces, and special moments include Emmons rendition of the classic jazz standard "Cherokee," classic country tune "Anytime", "Gravy Waltz", "(Back Home Again in) Indiana" "There Will Never Be Another You", and Emmons original piece "Bluemmons", a funky-swing tune with a catchy melody, and superb group. One of the most important parts of this session is the timeframe after Garland's debut album. Only 2 years had gone by when Emmons released this jazz album with a phenomenal group of musicians playing with him. The band makes this recording session come alive, but Emmons is the icing on the cake, with great ideas and control with the steel guitar. Each member of the group plays off one another very well and they compliment one another superbly from one track to the next. Overall, having an

⁹ Leigh, Spencer. "Buddy Emmons." *The Independent*, Aug 10, 2015.
<http://search.proquest.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/docview/1702324939?accountid=10361>.

¹⁰ Ken Dryden, "Buddy Emmons: *Steel Guitar Jazz*". Allmusic:
<https://www.allmusic.com/album/steel-guitar-jazz-mw0000593706>

understanding of both the time period and the amount of control Emmons had during this session, goes to show just how country musicians did indeed cross over to jazz in many new and unique ways.

The next album that is important to discuss is a unique, and interesting sounding album by Gary Burton in 1966 called *Tennessee Firebird*. After finding this album, and listening to it, many times, it definitely was the catalyst for wanting to discuss and write this specific paper on the fusion and mix of country, roots, Americana and jazz music. This specific session is very important in the fusion of country and jazz music idioms, in two specific ways. One has to do with the producer and professional guitarist Chet Atkins overseeing the session as well Burton who arranged, wrote, and had Chet look for the specific musicians in the Nashville and bluegrass music scene. Some of the noteworthy musicians from the bluegrass and Nashville session music scene include steel guitarist Emmons who was discussed above, professional banjoist Sonny Osborne and mandolinist Bobby Osborne of bluegrass supergroup The Osborne Brothers. Other noteworthy members of these recording sessions included bluegrass violinist Buddy Spicher, Chet Atkins on guitar, and jazz maestros Roy Haynes on drums and Steve Swallow on bass to name a few. Hadley from *Downbeat* magazine sheds light on the interesting and pertinent facts from this session, first by describing the background and timeline, “In 1966, [violinist] Spicher and other jazz-obsessed country players, including pedal steel guitarist Buddy Emmons, were rounded up by Atkins for one of Burton’s earliest feature recordings. ‘I got to meet Steve Swallow and Roy Haynes,’ Spicher said. ‘Roy came over to me at one point when I was playing ‘Faded Love,’ an old Western swing song that Gary treated with jazz chords. He said to me, ‘That’s the most beautiful thing I have ever heard.’ That made my life.’”¹¹ Hadley then goes

¹¹ Hadley, “Bebop Hoe-Down: Jazz & Country Have Been Making Some Innovative Connections”, *Down beat* volume 72, no. 12 (2005): 50.

even more into detail illuminating upon the special makings of this session, “Burton calls this 1966 album, *Tennessee Firebird*, one of his favorite albums in his discography. ‘The challenge and fun of doing that was working with the country musicians,’ Burton said. ‘They didn’t read music or know the names of the chord symbols as they are familiar to jazz musicians. I had to teach them the new arrangements of the songs by rote. I worked myself around the room, teaching each player the harmonic progressions. But they did a tremendous job and threw themselves into my wild concepts for the songs.’”¹² Hadley goes to show furthermore how inspired these country musicians were by jazz music and the giants of the genre, “In the late ’50’s, Buddy Spicher—one of the great fiddlers in country music—lost his heart to bebop listening to Sonny Rollins and Dizzy Gillespie on visits to New York clubs. ‘All my life from then on, whenever I would be playing fiddle, even if it was with some guy singing a country song, I pretended I was a jazz trumpet player,’ Spicher said. ‘We would jam all night after playing the Grand Ole Opry. Sometimes we would stay up for a week at a place called Big Jeff’s. We were all hoping some day to be in that bebop world.’”¹³ From this information gathered as a primary source, it is very interesting to read about this ideas, and just how inspired musicians can be in country when listening to jazz and vice versa. *Tennessee Firebird* is a seminal album, that stands alone from the other records discussed, due to the new fusion and arrangements that bring more of country and jazz with modal, and more complex harmonies together. The pieces that stand out in this record include “Faded Love”, “Gone”, “I Want You”, “Just Like A Woman” by Bob Dylan, and “Tennessee Firebird”, with a very fast banjo roll kick off by Sonny Osborne.

¹² Hadley, “Bebop Hoe-Down: Jazz & Country Have Been Making Some Innovative Connections”, *Down beat* volume 72, no. 12 (2005): 50-51.

¹³ Hadley, “Bebop Hoe-Down: Jazz & Country Have Been Making Some Innovative Connections”, *Down beat* volume 72, no. 12 (2005): 50.

This tune especially is a kind of "crooked" bluegrass tune, with strange chord changes, and a very interesting vibraphone solo by Burton, bringing into focus many idioms fusing at once, modal jazz, bluegrass, and a tinge of old-time music.

Burton himself provides details about the similarities between the two idioms in a record review by Tom Wilmeth in 2015 as Burton says "Both genres are rhythmically powerful, both feature improvised solos and, in both, the musicians have an enormous respect for instrumental skill and creativity."¹⁴ This statement is shared by many musicians that have had experience collaborating in various genres. From a personal standpoint, my time spent in Tennessee brought insight into this subject. I found that although many of the musicians did not read sheet music, they were some of the best musicians I have ever played with in idioms that foster improvisation, rhythm, time, and tone with creativity intertwined. This album was a very important point for Burton's career, and although the album was not widely received at the time in either country or jazz music, I believe it is one of the most pivotal and most important albums in how country and jazz music were fused, arranged, and used with instrumentation from both genres as well as musicians to create something unique, challenging to the listener, and record companies at the time.

Moving on now to the next important musician and innovator of this fusion and mix, is the great guitarist Lenny Breau with the help from pedal steel great Buddy Emmons. The recording in which they bring together both country standards, but with a very jazz infused rhythm, feel and improvisation is the compilation called "Swingin' On A Seven String." Originally released in 1984 it includes the classic jazz tune seen on Emmons own jazz album

¹⁴ Tom Wilmeth, "Gary Burton in Nashville: 1960's *Tennessee Firebird* was a fusion album like no other". <http://somethingelsereviews.com/2015/04/17/gary-burton-tennessee-firebird/>

“Back in Indiana”, as well as classic country tunes with a reharmonized, jazz rhythm, and swing infused feel on “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” made famous by highly regarded Father of Bluegrass Bill Monroe. There is also a classic bluegrass piece, reworked with Breau’s magnificent false harmonic tapping work on “Bonaparte’s Retreat” my personal favorite off the entire album collection. Michael John Simmons of *Acoustic Guitar* magazine writes when describing Breau’s work in country music, from his parents being working musicians in country bands, “That biographical tidbit puts this collection of jazz arrangements of country music standards in perspective and helps explain why Breau's versions of songs like "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," "Blue Moon of Kentucky," and "Bonaparte's Retreat" are not only brilliantly played, but also have extra emotional depth.”¹⁵ The author at the end of his review wraps up with an intriguing notion, “Musicians have been mixing jazz and country since the 1920s, but they have rarely done it better than this.”¹⁶ In the matter of this statement, everyone is definitely entitled to their opinion, and throughout this research, there has been a lot of variety in what the fusion of country and jazz music comes out to be, and how it is put together. In Breau and Emmons’ case, through their work together specifically on this record, the sensibility of melody and tone is very much leaning towards a country music style, while keeping the rhythm, improvisation, and interplay in the bebop, swing, and very jazz oriented musical styles along with superb bop phrasing in the pocket through each piece.

After discussing the major figures in the fusion and joining of jazz and country, it is important to mention relevant and current musicians and music that is being discovered and played to show how this musical creativity, and challenge continues. As writer Asher Wolf states

¹⁵ Michael, John Simmons. "Swingin' On A Seven String." *Acoustic Guitar*, (09, 2005, 1995), <http://search.proquest.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/docview/1484647?accountid=10361>.

¹⁶ Simmons. "Swingin' On A Seven String." *Acoustic Guitar*, (09, 2005, 1995), <http://search.proquest.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/docview/1484647?accountid=10361>.

in the 2016 edition of *Jazziz*, when discussing guitarist John Scofield's hit release "Country For Old Men", "Scofield crafted *Country for Old Men* to elucidate the commonalities between country and jazz, namely their mutual 'basis in song.' 'The barriers have been down for many, many years now,' he notes."¹⁷ Scofield recruits for this special record date veteran bassist of Burton's special country jazz fusion date Steve Swallow, drummer Bill Stewart, and pianist Larry Goldings for a special recording of jazz infused country standards. "It's really a jazz record," Scofield says of *Country for Old Men*, released in September on the Impulse!/Verve imprint. "We take the country tunes and turn them into jazz because, it turns out, you can swing anything."¹⁸ Suggested pieces that really show the stylings of country, with heavy jazz influence include "Red River Valley", "Jolene", "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry", "Faded Love", and "Wildwood Flower", a classic Appalachian piece written by The Carter Family. Overall, it is very inspiring and exciting to see how jazz musicians are continually pushing the envelope and finding interest, and inspiration through country and bluegrass music, which has such a rich cultural and musical history.

The ideas and importance behind fusing musical styles while keeping an open mind is highly important. The idioms of country and jazz in some ways such as specific instrumentation and styles are somewhat different. But through this research, there is definite proof, creativity, and superb musical examples that show how and why these musical idioms have been fused. Just as Oullette and Harrison mention the importance and understanding of the fusion and appreciation in country and jazz music, the statement from the beginning of Wondrich's writing

¹⁷ Asher, Wolf . "Gone Country." *Jazziz*, (10/16/2016): 22-23, <http://search.proquest.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/docview/1862304932?accountid=10361>.

¹⁸ Wolf . "Gone Country." *Jazziz*, (10/16/2016): 22-23, <http://search.proquest.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/docview/1862304932?accountid=10361>.

is inspiring, and important to remember, that “[we] might be able to pick up a couple of pointers as well about making music that can be pop and art, rootsy and new, fun and challenging.”¹⁹

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¹⁹ Wondrich, “When hillbilly and jazz found common cause”, *New York Times* (November 19th, 2000): AR29.

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