



BONNIE ‘PRINCE’ BILLY AND THE RISE AND RISE OF AMERICANA

by David Morrison, March 2003

For the best part of my working life, I have sold CD’s and vinyl to the general public in Brighton and elsewhere. This can be a privileged position in which to spend kibble-earning hours, because constant contact with a public that is ever-aching for fresh artistic stimuli can never be less than an education. Particularly rewarding is noting the emergence of a band from buzz to big time.

Following a flu-ridden, Lemsip-guzzling Chris Martin charm a Concorde 2 peppered with around fifty curious souls, to blanket tabloid coverage and heading toward Hollywood establishment has been quite a hoot. Watching The White Stripes ascend from candy cane obscurity to Daily Mirror ‘Blunk’ hysteria was a real scream. But, most satisfying of all is seeing how a ‘scene’ develops. For 20-odd years, I’ve watched it all happen – the New Wave of British Heavy Metal and Nu-Metal; Acids’ House and Jazz; Electroclash, New Romantic and it’s unfortunate Romo revival; Hardbag, Hardcore, Fraggie Britpop, Jungle, Trip-Hop – ad-fucking-infinitum, tagged by the press for better or worse - destined to implode before a natural conclusion, to head back underground or mutate into something else entirely, *or* in that rare instance, actually endure.

However, there is one particular area of music that stretches back over nine decades, that is still here and more than thriving. It retains most every key element of its accepted sonic identity since gaining it’s original name all those years back, yet continues to develop at a furious pace. Until recent years, it had a different name - one that would make the average Hank retch (much like ‘jazz’ - acid or otherwise, does for me.) Unlike so many scenes that have blossomed and expired during its lifetime, it has developed organically over a long period. As a result of it being not a modern cultural phenomenon symptomatic of the times (although it *is* as vital as it gets,) but being a natural continuation of a traditional art form and originating rurally, its survival and continued evolution are assured. It used to be called “country“. Now, it is popularly known as Americana. And although you may have failed to notice, it is absolutely everywhere.

“Do you like American music? / I like American music best” – Violent Femmes

Don’t get me wrong - country music still very much exists, and has every right to remain known as such. Curiously, however, it is now generally viewed by those that appreciate

such sounds in a big way as under the Americana umbrella, rather than the much more obvious, historically considered reverse situation. The reasons for this are complex, but the fact is that if, like me, you follow this most powerful and influential musical movement since “Grunge” very closely, you will have noted that it’s parameters now stretch as wide as to the rustic, avant-garde musings of Boxhead Ensemble, to the desert-blown, ambient soundscapes of Friends of Dean Martinez and the electronica of Host (comprising members of The Walkabouts and Midnight Choir.) As firmly as tradition remains, so rampant experimentation has entered the equation. As Frank Zappa famously stated “*Jazz isn’t dead – it just smells funny.*” Oh fuck, that word again.

So, let’s just accept that Americana is rooted in the traditional folk musics of North America. (I’m talking continental, particularly as the lion’s share of the great stuff these days is coming from Canada.) Also accepted is that it has until fairly recently been popularly viewed as frequently associated with startlingly naff dancing by brutish rednecks in snakeskin boots, Jackass mullets and sculptured beards, and airbrushed inbreds with unfeasibly perfect dental hygiene and gravity-defying, peroxide beehives. There is still much of ‘that kind of country’ to be had for those that want it, but there is so, so much more that is truly great roots music bearing identical lineage. Trust me. Believe me, also, when I say that the popular misconception that country music is depressing is utter bollocks. Sure, it deals in major themes and minor chords, but that’s what makes it so beautiful. It’s as uplifting as any music can get.

“Make that black record / We can all sing along to the bad luck lullaby” – Songs:Ohia

As is said of the ‘heart songs’ of San Francisco songwriter Tom Armstrong: “*A song of sadness need not be depressing. Sung with warmth and depth, a ‘heart song’ can become an enjoyable release of pent-up emotions that might otherwise go unexpressed.*” And to paraphrase a My Morning Jacket tagline from the good Velimir Pavle Ilic of our esteemed cross-town contemporaries *Careless Talk Costs Lives*, ‘Sorrow Is The New Exhilaration’. I’ll throw my three bob in and suggest the term ‘Melancholic Euphoria’ – just for a laugh.

The sadness in country music reflects the sadness in life. It’s honest. It is also soulful, thrilling, intelligent, political, deeply affecting and often hilarious. This is a good thing. But hey, you can do a lot better than me if you want to know the facts. Turn to *The Rough Guide to Country Music* or Peter Doggett’s *Are You Ready For The Country?* for the history and the trailblazers. I just want to take a peek at where it is now, especially where you live.

“She thinks Will Oldham sings like a goat / She has seen his picture and he looks chubby” – Gore Slut

January 27th this year saw the release of an album called *Master and Everyone* by an artist called Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy, a man born Will Oldham in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1971. During that freezing day, 21 copies were handed over the counter of the Brighton independent record store I currently bumble around in. Respectively, this was 17 and 19 more than the other two anticipated albums released that day: *Danse Macabre* by press

darlings The Faint and *Overgrown Eden* by rock infants Inme, a band that had recently sold out Concorde 2.

Bonnie 'Prince' Billy is considered a major artist. When major artists bring something new out, it is not uncommon for their label to offer substantial discounts on their back catalogue. In the case of this artist, this is a fair few titles, because he's kept busy. At irresistible prices, then, a steady stream of this man's canon left the shop. There were also many who intently, curiously browsed, but didn't buy. Quiet Billymania!

Consider this: The small place I work in sold those 21 CD's (not forgetting there were vinyl copies sold, also) and a subsequent heap of previous titles. Imagine what Virgin and HMV and MVC may have sold. And now consider that *Master and Everyone* is, essentially, an album of folk and country songs. Songs by a man that - to many - actually *does* sound like a goat.

Will Oldham is as unlikely a star as you could ever imagine, but a star he is. As the facial profile sleeve shot on the newie illustrates, he has a gigantic, unkempt beard. Were it not for the giveaway three sleepers in his ear, it could be a photo of a captured late-19th century outlaw, or a poor man from the dustbowl. His hair is rapidly receding, he often wears dungarees and he is indeed chubby. And yet, he is worshiped, adored and obsessed over, every note he has ever produced hunted down by fanatics. That it is Will Oldham - this awkward and bizarre, singularly *unattractive* character - that has become the figurehead of the Americana scene, and not some babe, is another very good thing. As to *why*, it is a matter for egghead pub debate, but there are obvious surface reasons.

***"We were just sitting listening to music, drinking tea / Talking about The Palace Brothers, Bonnie 'Prince' Billy / That kind of thing, you know"* - Half Man Half Biscuit**

He seems mysterious, eccentric and reeking of the unidentifiable darkness we perceive of the American south, beyond its unfortunate history. That will fascinate any discerning listener who is not from that region, plus many that are. He is obviously highly intelligent, and confident of often presenting his lyrics in a gothic English from an alternate history. He writes frankly and curiously about the ambiguities and tragedies of life; the power, ecstasies and perversities of sex and the fears of death and loss. There is not a single one of us that is not affected by such matters. He seems restless and hungry, difficult and interesting, vulnerable and needy. We're all curious as to the different, even though we're all just like him. Plus, he writes fucking brilliant tunes. As The Palace Brothers, Palace Music, Palace Songs, in his current (seemingly most comfortable, certainly most commercially successful and critically lauded) persona - and in numerous collaborations - Will Oldham has slowly become one of the world's truly great songwriters - and a wonky icon, to boot. At the end of the day, it's those songs that matter, and Will Oldham's songs are very special. Just ask Johnny Cash.

The Man in Black is the first country artist I ever heard, as my Dad (quite aptly, as it happens) owned the live San Quentin album. Then it was probably my Mum's Glen

Campbell cassette boxed set and her mournful daily humming of *Dreams of the Everyday Housewife*, but I was far from emotionally developed enough to pick up such signals at the time. It wasn't until much later, after formative years of Metal, prog, punk, reggae and disco – but *particularly* punk - that I was to become entranced by music with country at its heart. My introduction was sudden and startling, and by default. It was when R.E.M. entered my life that everything changed.

Promise me one thing. Promise me you'll *never* become obsessed with a band - with *anything* - like I became obsessed with R.E.M. Guarantee me you'll never send quids to Italy for a CD by a simply horrific band called Flor de Mal - because it has Mike Mills on handclaps on one track. That's how it got. I had to have *everything* - every note, every bootleg, every guest appearance. So, when Peter Buck produced *March 16-20, 1992* by Uncle Tupelo and Michael Stipe appeared on a Jason and The Scorchers E.P, I was in there like a shot, and immediately knocked off my feet. What was this? Country? Or rock? Can it be both?

Of course, I'd heard Neil Young, The Allman Brothers, even banjos on R.E.M. songs and such, but never really got the drift. I used to be a bit a slow like that. I'd been played Gram Parsons and thought it was okay. But with Uncle Tupelo, it all began to piece together. The guys in this band were about my age and had grown up listening to the same sort of stuff as me. They saw music more terrifying and emotional in the outlaw country singers – the original punks – than they did in the likes of Henry Rollins, and that seemed to be my cue. From this point on, there was no stopping me. I'd found *my* music.

I've come forward with it, and continue to go back into it, right to its origins. And what it has become to me, is my new punk rock. That's because punk and country have so much in common, both musically and ideally. Punk and country have been shagging for a *long* time. X were also The Knitters; The Mekons exist alongside The Waco Brothers; punk band All indulge their country fantasies in *Drag The River*... and have you heard *Bad Livers*? Uncle Tupelo covered The Stooges. This is what we want.

There have always been signposts to the scary country landscape, but even the discerning listener has been hesitant to follow them and explore it, for reasons already stated. The Clash championed Joe Ely; Evan Dando was rarely seen without a faded Gram Parsons t-shirt; Elvis Costello recorded a pure country album; Cauty and Drummond summoned the late Tammy Wynette: seemingly innocuous incidentals in the course of musical history, but if you're like me you will have sought out Joe, Gram, Tammy and George Jones' stuff, and begun to understand the vitality and import of this art form you'd so long considered naff. Believe me, re-evaluating a figure such as Dolly Parton is quite liberating. If you aren't like me then you've probably spent your time in a much less obsessive manner in all areas of experience, avoiding therapy in the process. I doff my cap, but now it's time to catch up.

As I say, country-fried sounds are everywhere. In the news pages of NME recently, a report on Trent Reznor and Zack de La Rocha being moved to tears upon seeing the video for Johnny Cash's rendition of the formers' *Hurt*. As he has covered Will Oldham, so he has

covered Nine Inch Nails. The great man is far from well; his frailty and great age are not in any way disguised in the video - at the performer's insistence, naturally. That the musical worlds of these men are interlinked is interesting enough, but a classic example of how influential country music actually is. That it is reported on in The Vines-sponsored NME is heartening, as I'll take any exposure for great music. Ryan Adams – still tagged country-rock – has just won a Brit Award as Best International Male Performer and has become an NME regular - if only because of his twattish outpourings and increasing unpredictability. At the recent Brighton Turin Brakes gig, the intermission music included Hank Williams and Gillian Welch and there was near hysteria and a blue-rinse stampede for prime vistas at The Be Good Tanyas show in February. The White Stripes openly declare their love of country, have recorded Dolly's *Jolene* and others and modeled their new image on classic Nashville chic. Beastie Boy Mike Diamond recorded a country pastiche album as Country Mike, as have Ween, as Ween. I say you don't indulge in such projects without genuine affection for the genre. Grunge bastards Mudhoney's Steve Turner is releasing a country project; The Charlatans next album is described as heavily Flying Burrito Brothers-influenced, and there are persistent rumours that The Coral will release a country record this year. Ain't no stoppin' it, y'all, just like kudzu.

The key, of course, to what finally made country cool, that leg-up to Will Oldham and those that share such musical visions, was the wholly unexpected, staggering success of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, plus the accompanying and quite brilliant *Down From The Mountain* music documentary and its own fine soundtrack. It bust the doors wide open for country music to such a degree that the arthouse director's composers of choice are starting to emerge from the world of Americana. Country songs make great cinema. It's a far cry from *Deliverance*, but exactly the same principle.

Proving themselves continually heavily influential way beyond their lifetime, it is Uncle Tupelo that is again showing the way. Ex-co-frontmen Jeff Tweedy (now Wilco) and Jay Farrar (Son Volt, now solo) have both provided music for movies. The score for *Chelsea Walls* was written by Tweedy; Farrar has scored *The Slaughter Rule*, and the rest of that soundtrack is provided by state-of-the-art Americana luminaries. This is merely the beginning. It's but a matter of time before as dedicated a project as *The Slaughter Rule* scoops a major gong, becoming a classic collection in the process. It'll be another gigantic leap forward for a music much maligned for far too long.

A short time ago, I was invited to the launch night of 'The Americana Music Club' at The Sanctuary Cella. I thought the name was deliciously obvious and direct, but still had no real idea what to expect. What I found was a big sack of gold. The room was not packed, but busy, with an air of expectation. A DJ popped on The Gourds and I was extremely impressed. Following a reasonably accomplished young singer-songwriter, two young lads of suitably Redwood physique took the stage, armed with acoustic guitars. For half an hour or so, they silenced the room. This was Alex, 20, and Will, 22, the core of Hart Crane, playing very sad songs of a country leaning – just like their heroes, Mark Eitzel and Jay Farrar. These lads, co-organiser Nick and the entire audience... not one of them can have been over 25. The youth of today, eh?

This is happening all over the country. The UK Americana scene is huge. Homegrown bands of increasing quality and originality are popping up all the time. As a promoter who stages Americana and related shows in Brighton, I'm under an avalanche of largely exceptional demos, and it may be apparent that this makes me soar. In Manchester, there are a host of great bands. In Scotland and the Midlands, there are more. Even in Leicester, that long-forgotten hotbed of country genius, there is The HaveNots, a Cowboy Junkies-esque duo – aged 19 and 22.

Hart Crane is one young band in Brighton that is turned on by country, and there are others. It is no surprise that, at fucking last, this generally sussed and highly creative community of ours has woken up to the beauty, scope and verve of Americana. As a result, Brighton has become a key date on the tour schedule of an increasing flow of visiting heavyweights and underground acts operating in the genre. Not so long back, there was The Greys and a couple of visits a year by The Handsome Family. These days, there is somewhat more. Following this convoluted introduction, it will be my job in L.U.V to tell you exactly what each month, and also suggest recordings I think you may enjoy. As for April 2003, you couldn't have dropped in at a better time:

Kicking off at The Freebutt on Friday 4th, Cambridge's answer to Clem Snide, big John Peel favourites The Broken Family Band make their long-awaited Brighton bow. They are currently working on their debut album, following the lauded *The King Will Build a Disco* EP of last year. Ascendant London country-rock outfit The Snakes support, also on their first visit.

Thursday 10th brings enduring Chicagoan country-noir gigaholic Chris Mills to The Prince Albert for an intimate solo show, supported by Manchester's master of the miserable, Matt Hill. In a two-part celebration of the 5th Anniversary of the UK's leading Americana label Loose, two extraordinary shows will be taking place at The Hanbury Ballroom on Tuesday 22nd and Wednesday 23rd. Neil Young obsessive and the most 'American' of all British Americana acts, Peter Bruntnell performs with a full band that features guitar prodigy James Walbourne, and may possibly include Son Volt pedal-steel player Eric Heywood. Horse Stories supports in another eagerly awaited first visit here. L.A.-based Australian Toby Burke is attracting a lot of fuss for his lilting acoustic edginess, and should not be missed.

The following evening should bring a tear, as it represents the final chance to see The Arlenes around these parts. Acknowledged as about the finest country act this country has produced, it is often forgotten that one of them is American. Nonetheless, they are wonderful, our own Kris 'n' Rita, and are uprooting to America. Big Steve and Stephanie Arlene, I can't say I think much of your timing. Come wave them off into the smoke. Support comes from hot London Burritos-obsessed quintet The Redlands Palomino Co, who are good enough to headline.

Capping a blessed (but reasonably typical) month, Laura Cantrell makes a swift return as probably the biggest female name in country right now, Gillian Welch excepted. With a detached New York cool, ethereal physical beauty and a voice that straddles Patsy Cline

and Lucinda Williams, she is destined for legendary status. Lambchop member and sickeningly adept songwriter of breezy hillbilly ditties Paul Burch opens the show and, again, is unmissable. Meet you near the spittoon.

As for shiny discs, there are offerings due in April from Rosanne Cash, Smog, Lucinda Williams, M. Ward and Noahjohn, so I'd recommend you start paying closer attention to that junk mail.

And I didn't say 'alt.country' once.

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