

From Singing to Cryin': Towards an Understanding of The Steel Guitar in Country Music 1915-1935

Daniel Neill, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Possibilities for research about the steel guitar are limitless. Apart from its musical complexities, the instrument raises questions about the nature of popular culture, invention and the aesthetics of acculturated music, all of which are worthy of study. (Kahn 1976, 6)

In November of 1979 the journal of the Hawaiian Music Foundation, *Ha'Illono Mele*, reprinted an article originally from the *Detroit News* entitled "Man Who Gave Steel Guitar to Nashville Dies". In the story, credit for the steel guitar's historic and indispensable role in country music is placed firmly and solely in the hands of Hawaiian immigrant and long-time Flint, Michigan, resident Rudy Waikuiki. It is claimed by the author that Waikuiki's influence on Beecher "Pete" Kirby (a.k.a. Bashful Brother Oswald), who would go on to play Dobro for Roy Acuff, is the reason that the steel guitar became popular in country music. According to the *Detroit News*, in 1929, Oswald, like many other Southerners, had moved from his home in Tennessee to Flint, Michigan, in search of work in the auto industry. When Oswald's quest for factory work failed, he used his skills as a guitarist and banjoist to make a living performing at house parties hosted by other recently migrated Southerners. It was there that he encountered Waikuiki, became obsessed with the sound of the Hawaiian guitar, and, according to the *Detroit News*, single-handedly popularized it with Roy Acuff.

The narrative of the aforementioned article, while providing some interesting facts on a particular instance of cultural exchange between Hawaiian and North American music, oversimplifies and mythologizes this interaction for the sake of an obituary for Mr. Waikuiki. There is a palpable sense that the author is attempting to elevate the contributions of both Waikuiki and Bashful Brother Oswald for the purposes of attracting the interest of readers with a nice tidy fact of music history for conversation. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately for a musicologist), facts of music history are rarely tidy or straightforward and rarely emerge from dialogue between only two people. As an example of cultural exchange involving race, class, imperialism, commercialization, and mass media, the musical paths travelled by the steel guitar have been no different.

A critical reading of the *Detroit News* article raises many questions. This paper is the first step in

working towards an understanding of why the steel guitar, which enjoyed such faddish popularity in the early 20th Century, has endured as an integral sound in country music after falling out of favour with many other popular genres.

Popular Perception of the Steel Guitar

One does not have to look far to find references to the sound of the steel guitar as a cornerstone of country music.

When Hollywood or Madison Avenue wants you to think of Nashville country music, they trundle out the steel guitars. True, they may throw in banjo, fiddle and (straight) guitar. But the overriding sound will be the characteristic whine of the steel guitar as its been played in Music City since the late 40s. (Kienzle 1980, 28)

Also in 1980, Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* deduced that country music's new wave of popularity was both a reaction to the fad of disco as well as a musical reinforcement of patriotic traditionalist ideals. He observed that "where disco's characteristic instrument was the spacey synthesizer, and new wave's an agitated bass guitar, country's essential sound is the nostalgic sigh of a pedal steel guitar" (1980, 29).

Broadly speaking, fretting the strings on a guitar with steel allows for greater volume and clarity of tone, more ability for ornamentations like vibrato and glissando, and maximum sustain of a note (Kahn 1976, 6). These traits allow for a guitar to be a more expressive instrument in many respects, but most of all, they give the guitar the ability to mimic the qualities of a human voice. This ability was increased further with the introduction of electrical amplification in the early 1930s, but references to the "singing", "crying", "whining," and "sighing" of the steel guitar are easily found decades earlier.

In 1916, the sound of the Hawaiian guitar in a Los Angeles production of *The Bird of Paradise* was described as "the haunting, yearning cry of steel pressed against the strings of a guitar" (*Los Angeles Times* 1916, 4). The ability of the steel guitar to emulate the cry of a human voice made it particularly useful in styles of music which sought to express loss and heartache. Ray Charles, whose album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* highlighted the common ground between country, soul, and R&B

music, was initially drawn to country music because the musicians “made them steel guitars cry and whine, and it really attracted me” (Chappelle and Garofalo 1977, 243).

More recently, Joli Jensen described the role of the steel guitar as popularized in the influential honky-tonk music of Hank Williams: “The pain that permeates the honky-tonk genre is condensed, I think, in the sound of the steel. It stands for, invokes, and evokes emotional intensity. The steel guitar offers the wail of love and loss that men are too stoic to express directly, that they try to drown in beer and whiskey, that they live with and cannot leave behind” (1998, 33). Similarly, Canadian pedal steel guitarist Edward “Pee Wee Charles” Ringwald starkly described the sound of the steel guitar as “the sound of rock-bottom loneliness and heart stabbing isolation. It’s the soundtrack to ecstatic self-pity – the musical glue holding together the emotion of a song” (International Musician 2014,17).

Origins of the Hawaiian Steel Guitar

The physical and musical journey of the steel guitar and its often fleeting presence in a number of genres has been fascinating. In less than a century it has developed from a slightly modified six-stringed acoustic guitar into a mechanically complex and musically versatile electrified instrument with up to fourteen strings. Its musical usage has followed diverse paths from its traditional Hawaiian folk roots to many genres of Western vernacular and popular music as well as the sacred steel guitar traditions of the churches of the House of God and Church of the Living God. The steel guitar is unique in that its rapid evolution in terms of physical form, musical configuration, and musical usage have been largely dictated by the demands of the North American popular music industry. While it is of utmost importance to the sacred steel tradition, steel guitar’s relationship with country music has been the most enduring within the realm of popular culture.

Guitar-like instruments were introduced to the Hawaiian islands by Spanish and Portuguese sailors and Mexican cowboys during the first half of the 1800s. John Troutman cites an 1840 advertisement for guitar strings in a Hawaiian newspaper called *The Polynesian* as the first proof of guitars on Hawaiian soil (2013, 29-30). The subsequent theories of how the Spanish guitar came to be played “Hawaiian style” are much more complicated. Although Joseph Kekuku is credited with inventing the Hawaiian style of playing guitar and popularizing it in Hawaii and North America, there are many written accounts that problematize this story. The most compelling of these is an account by Charles E. King claiming that

Kekuku actually got the idea to play the guitar with a steel bar from a young stowaway from India who was casually applying gottuvadyam¹ technique to a guitar (1976, 5-6). This meeting is supposed to have taken place in 1884, and Kekuku is credited with “inventing” the Hawaiian guitar in 1885. If Kekuku did in fact appropriate gottuvadyam technique and use it to “invent” the Hawaiian steel guitar, it would be the first of many types of acculturation the instrument has been subject to, and when one considers the musical impact of the steel guitar, it becomes a moment of unacknowledged importance in American popular music history.

Hawaiian Music on the Mainland

Although the first “Hawaiian music craze” is usually cited as occurring between 1910 and 1920, Hawaiian culture and music were present on the mainland before the turn of the century. America had been politically involved with Hawaii since the 1880s, and eventually annexed the island as a U.S. territory in 1898. Tin Pan Alley songwriters began writing Hawaiian-themed songs as early as 1896 with titles like “My Honolulu Queen”, “My Gal From Honolulu”, and “Ginger Lou” often resembling Hawaiian-themed coon songs. Recordings of Hawaiian music were made by the Edison Company in San Francisco as early as 1899, but the oldest surviving Hawaiian recordings were issued by Victor in 1904 (Garrett 2008, 168-72). John Troutman’s research places troupes of Hawaiian musicians and dancers in the American South as early as 1893 (2013, 32). It wasn’t until almost two decades later, on September 11, 1911, that the first staging of the musical *The Bird of Paradise* in Los Angeles (and later on Broadway) brought Hawaiian music and culture to the masses and awakened an appetite for the exotic in the American popular imagination. The immense popularity of *The Bird of Paradise* and many subsequent imitations helped to introduce the sounds of Hawaiian music and the Hawaiian guitar to many parts of North America (Garrett 2008, 178-179). In 1915, the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco included a “Hawaiian Pavillion” for the purposes of increasing knowledge and understanding of the islands, and to promote them as a tourist destination (Garrett 2008, 184). As opposed to other foreign ethnicities, the stereotyped Hawaiian was seen as exotic, but not threatening; sensually appealing, but somehow safe (Garrett 2008, 194). Concerning the growing popularity of Hawaiian music on the mainland, industry representatives reported that in 1916, recorded Hawaiian guitar music outsold all other genres in the United States (Adams 1917, 143).

Between 1915 and 1935, American popular culture began to articulate its own unique musical meanings onto Hawaiian music, and more particularly the sound of the Hawaiian guitar. The gradually widening gap between the Hawaiian guitar and Hawaiian musical culture in the first quarter of the 20th Century was a result of America's political and economic involvement with Hawaii, Tin Pan Alley's fascination with Hawaiian exoticism, and the increased availability of print music and cheaply produced musical instruments. Hawaiian guitar instructional method books began to appear as early as 1916. At first these method books drew heavily on Hawaiian repertoire, but later series such as those published by Oahu (a company headquartered in Cleveland) tended to disregard the cultural origins of the Hawaiian guitar in favour of attention to other "world musics" and "music of the Americas" (Oahu 1942).

Also contributing to the gradual loss of the steel guitar's "Hawaiianess" was the fact that popular Hawaiian guitarists like Sol Hoopii and Frank Ferera were recording American repertoire by the late 1920s, thus contributing to the popular impression of the instrument being used to play solo instrumental versions of popular songs rather than for its typical accompanying role in Hawaiian music. Effectively, the above developments put the already contested musical and cultural meanings of the steel guitar in the hands of those who controlled print media and instrument-making enterprises.² In terms of ontology, the Hawaiian guitar gradually became known simply as the "steel guitar"; while the exotic sound of the instrument was privileged, by the mid-1920s, the repertoire and vernacular musical use of the Hawaiian guitar gradually disassociated from Hawaiian traditional or even *Hapa Haole* music.³

While the Hawaiian music craze within popular print and recording industries in the 1910s and 1920s was important in the proliferation of the steel guitar and the eventual loss of Hawaiian cultural connotations, its adoption by aurally transmitted vernacular musical practices was equally significant in its musical trajectory and relationship with country music. By looking at the different uses of the steel guitar in recordings by Jimmie Rodgers, the white blues of Jimmie Tarlton with Tom Darby and the proto-western swing playing of Bob Dunn with Milton Brown's Musical Brownies, I hope to work towards a better understanding of the steel guitar's enduring relationship with country music.

Interactions with Vernacular Music

The kīkā kila, or Hawaiian guitar, as it became known off the islands, sonically revolutionized every musical tradition it touched, from tradition-

al mele to protestant hymns introduced by New England missionaries, to the latest Tin Pan Alley sheet music imports that arrived on ships from San Francisco. Vaulted in status from serving as a typically rhythmic, accompanying instrument to that of a much more dynamic and melodic, or lead, instrument, the guitar would never be the same. (Troutman 2013, 31)

The Hawaiian way of playing guitar likely first passed into aurally transmitted vernacular music through Hawaiian interactions with rural working-class Americans of both African-American and European descent in the late 1890s and early 1900s. It is very possible that this "guarded intimacy between races" (Cantwell 1984, 31-32) in the lower strata of society played a significant role in putting the steel guitar in the hands of white blues musicians who would later become recognized as the forefathers of country music. This new and hybridized use of the steel guitar mapped new meanings onto the sound of the instrument which, while drawing on both African-American and Hawaiian traditions, became familiar to consumers of what would soon be known as hillbilly and country music.

Troutman (2013) presents strong evidence that African-American musicians who were often the source of inspiration and mentorship to white country and blues musicians may have been influenced by travelling Hawaiian troupes before 1920 to a larger extent than has been previously thought. Troutman suggests that the theories of "Africanisms" often used to explain the use of slides and one-stringed zithers by African-American Southerners may have obscured the significance of Hawaiian influence due to direct contact and the popularity of their music and guitar styles. Evidence attempting to link the bottleneck or lap-style guitar to monochord zithers may be rather flimsy, and could be attributed to the influence of Civil Rights and Black Pride movements (which coincided with the folk revival of the early 1960s) and their "celebrations of African-American culture and its ties to the African continent" (Troutman 2013, 27). Troutman's research opens up the possibility that the steel guitar became an indispensable component of country music as a result of African-American interaction with traveling Hawaiian performers and the subsequent influence of these African-Americans on the white blues musicians who would later become regarded as the forefathers of country music.

Jimmie Rodgers and the Steel Guitar

Jimmie Rodgers, whose early recordings showcased many interracial and intercultural musical exchanges, is widely regarded as the first true "star" of country music. Rodgers featured steel guitar on 29 of

his 114 official recordings (Miller 2013, 37). Although he didn't play the instrument himself, he (and/or his producers) undoubtedly had dual motives in his use of the Hawaiian steel guitar. Widely regarded as a populist in terms of his musical influences and expression, Rodgers would have likely employed the steel guitar to capitalize on the instrument's faddish and exotic modernity. After all, in spite of all its pretenses of rusticity and old-time nostalgia, country music has often embraced new musical trends when – and if – its performers, artists, and audience see fit. The steel guitar's ability to emulate "singing", "whining", and "crying" fit perfectly with the sentiments of many of Rodgers' recordings. Ellison's characterization of Rodgers as a "tragic troubador" (1995, 38-39) stresses the relationship between Rodgers' plaintive "blue yodel" and sound of the steel guitar as voices for the pathos that Rodgers sought to express and which would eventually be a key cathartic element in contemporary country music. Porterfield's 2007 biography quotes Rodgers coaching his musicians on how to perform emotively, stressing the importance of the expression of hardship: "It's gotta have pathos. Make folks feel it – like we do, but we gotta have the feelin' ourselves first. This is supposed to be pathetic" (75-76).

Rodgers used ten different steel guitarists, each with their own unique approach to the instrument. Joe Kaipo's playing on sessions in August and October of 1929 provide interesting examples of diverse uses of the steel guitar in Rodgers' songs. The first song of these sessions, "Everybody Does it In Hawaii", could be characterized as a Hawaiian-themed novelty song not unlike those produced by Tin Pan Alley three decades earlier. The lyric, which was penned, ironically, by Rodgers' sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams, describes the physical beauty and availability of a sexually objectified "hula girl". Kaipo's steel guitar is accompanied by ukuleles, which, while corroborating the Hawaiian theme, tend to muddle the overall texture with rhythmic and intonational slopiness. Kaipo aptly invokes an authentic Hawaiian feel by using a "tinkling" technique to sustain chords during the verses. Kaipo also uses an exaggerated glissando – also a signature Hawaiian guitar gesture – to emphasize the final syllable of "Ha-wai-YUH".

While Rodgers' previous steel players often played intro figures based on a song's melody, or shadowed Rodgers' vocal during verses, Kaipo may be the first to voice Rodgers' signature yodel on the steel guitar. This appears at first as a subtle reinforcement of the yodel in "Everybody Does It In Hawaii". Here, the steel guitar plays only the low notes of the descending yodelled figure along with Rodgers' vocal. However, on "Jimmie's Texas Blues", the

intro played by the steel guitar effectively voices the yodel without Jimmie, including the approach notes and the higher falsetto note of each pair. Kaipo's playing on "Jimmie's Texas Blues" features fills and strong accompaniment throughout the verses, but does not clutter the arrangement. Kaipo manages to blend a Hawaiian approach with what might be heard as an authentic blues aesthetic where the sound of the moving slide is as important as the destination chords themselves.

While the above examples show the familiar Hawaiian and blues connotations of the steel's sound, John Cali's more subdued steel playing on "Old Love Letters" is in stark contrast, and casts the steel in a role not unlike those described by Joli Jensen and Ed Ringwald earlier in this paper. Recorded during Rodgers' last session, on May 24, 1933, "Old Love Letters" is a song about fondly remembering and longing for lost love. After quoting an abbreviated version of the melody during the intro, Cali plays a wavering unison with Rodgers' voice along with the occasional fill during the verses. This doubled steel melody emphasizes the sense of loneliness and nostalgia already evident in the text sung by Rodgers. During the yodelled interlude, rather than playing unison with Rodgers' yodel, Cali accompanies it with high-voiced arpeggiations and chime effects which serve to enhance the convincing sense of pathos in Rodgers' voice. The sense of regret, sadness, and nostalgia for times gone by is of course heightened given the circumstances of the recording; Rodgers was effectively on his deathbed during the session, and he passed away 36 hours later.

White Blues and The Steel Guitar

At the same time as Rodgers began his recording career and extensive use of the Hawaiian steel guitar, other notable white blues musicians, including Cliff Carlisle, Frank Hutchison, Paul Johnson, Howard Dixon, and Jimmie Tarlton, were also playing guitar Hawaiian style. The musical approaches of these players range from the relatively primitive movement of a single chord voicing up and down the neck to the more advanced playing of intro "hooks" in addition to melodic shadowing or embellishment of the vocal melody. Frank Hutchison is one of the earliest white blues musicians to record with a steel guitar, and was photographed holding the guitar in both Hawaiian and bottleneck playing positions. He had been exposed to African-American music in the isolated region of Logan County, West Virginia, by a black musician named Bill Hunt. Hutchison's recording of "Worried Blues" provides an example of the basic use of the slide described above. He uses a glissando movement of the same triadic voice to different posi-

tions on the guitar's neck as an accompaniment for his vocal. Tim Miller suggests that in the type of playing exemplified by Hutchison, the sound of the movement of the slide is "generally more important than the destination" (2013, 34). This trait can be heard although to a lesser extent in the recordings of Tarlton and Darby as well as Jimmie Rodgers.

The lap steel guitar playing of Jimmie Tarlton exemplifies a blues-influenced style that also incorporated more "sophisticated" elements like the playing of hooks, fills and the shadowing of vocal melodies. Tarlton's duo work with Tom Darby yielded over 60 sides between 1927 and 1933, including "Birmingham Jail" and "Columbus Stockade Blues", which sold more than 200,000 copies for Columbia and went on to become country classics covered by Jimmie Davis, Willie Nelson, and Danny Davis. Tarlton and Darby recorded their first sides for Columbia in Atlanta on April 5, 1927, predating Jimmie Rodgers' first recordings by more than six months (Wolfe 1993, 245-248).

Tarlton's story is illustrative of the parallel musical lives led by the Southern white working class and their African-American neighbours and, due to his circumstances, Tarlton was able to learn both African-American slide guitar and Hawaiian-style guitar from primary sources. Tarlton was born in 1892 in South Carolina to sharecropper parents, who taught him to play fretless banjo and sing. He learned how to play an open-tuned guitar with a slide from African-American musicians in Georgia and the Carolinas by the time he was 12 years old. This suggests that African-American musicians in the South would have been well-acquainted with steel or slide guitar styles by 1904 (Wolfe 1993, 245).⁴ Tarlton left home at the age of 17 to pursue music full time, and while on the west coast in 1922, he met the Portuguese-Hawaiian Frank Ferrara, who taught him how to adapt popular songs to the steel guitar. When he returned to settle in Columbus, Georgia, he applied his newly acquired skills to the music of that region (Wolfe 1993, 246). Tarlton incorporated both African-American and Hawaiian elements into a white country blues context, but rarely made overt musical references to the instrument's Hawaiian origins, like Jimmie Rodgers' steel guitarists often did. The popularity of Tarlton's and Darby's recordings helped to solidify the sound and presence of the lap-style steel guitar as a normal feature of what would be marketed as hillbilly music. While the recordings of Jimmie Rodgers and Tarlton and Darby are by no means the only instances of the early use of the steel guitar in hillbilly records, they serve as examples of how the steel guitar gradually shed its overt Hawaiian connotations and was absorbed into the often invented traditions of hillbilly music.

Bob Dunn

When I was researching early commercially recorded steel guitarists in hillbilly and "hot" string band settings, it soon becomes apparent that the type of cultural exchange reported in the introduction of this paper was commonplace decades before Brother Oswald met Rudy Waikuiki. However, of the many early steel guitarists who have cited direct contact with travelling Hawaiian musicians as their first inspiration, the playing of Oklahoman native Bob Dunn stands out as having a pivotal role in securing the steel guitar as a key musical signifier in country music. Dunn wasn't the first to incorporate Hawaiian-style guitar into Southern string band music, nor was he the first to electrify a Hawaiian guitar. In fact, even Dunn's virtuosic and jazz-inspired improvisations had precedents in the earlier playing of Hawaiian guitar masters like Sol Hoopii, King Bennie Nawahi, and Bob Kaai. The most important factor in the musical legacy of Bob Dunn was the musical context in which he found himself with Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies in the winter of 1934. His introduction of the recently electrified Hawaiian guitar to Milton Brown's already immensely popular band helped expand the musical vocabulary of the instrument while drawing it further away from its connotations of Hawaiian music.

Dunn was born in 1908 (the same year as Alvin Rey, another steel guitar innovator) near Braggs, Oklahoma, and heard his first Hawaiian guitar in 1917 at a stage show in the wartime boomtown of Kusa, Oklahoma. This would have been during the height of the Hawaiian music craze, with the effects of the Panama-Pacific Exhibition of 1915 reverberating nationwide. Soon thereafter, Dunn purchased a Hawaiian guitar from a mail-order catalogue and began taking correspondence lessons with Walter Kolomoku, a native Hawaiian who had been a part of the Hawaiian Quintette, the pit band in the Broadway production of *Birds of Paradise* during its 1912 premiere. By 1927, at the age of 19, Dunn landed his first professional gig with the Panhandle Cowboys and Indians, which began seven years of playing with various vaudeville groups and on Midwest and Mexican border radio stations. In 1934, Dunn was hired to play with Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies and, at risk of the same type of oversimplification of which I accused the *Detroit News*, it seems that this was a key point at which steel guitar began to take on a new and unique life in country music (Ginell 2010, 19).

While the significance of Dunn and his work with Milton Brown has been largely overlooked until the past decade, Bill Malone gives him fair acknowledgment in *Country Music U.S.A.*, stating that "Bob

Dunn pioneered the electrification of the steel guitar while also moving that instrument dramatically away from the chorded, Hawaiian style” (2002, 163). The testimonials of other musicians who witnessed Dunn’s playing during his early days also support the fact that he was doing something entirely new with the steel in terms of both its musical use and its sonic properties. Dunn managed to balance his revolutionary technical advances and new applications with musical allusions to the familiar Hawaiian tradition of the instrument. In Dunn’s work with Brown and various other hot Southwest string bands is the gradual unlocking of the expressive and fiery musical potential of the instrument. Dunn openly acknowledged the influence of trombonist Jack Teagarden, but Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Frankie Trumbauer, and Bix Beiderbecke are also often cited as being audible influences in his playing (Wakefield 2010, 31). Dunn exploited the tone of his newly electrified instrument in ways that no one had heard before. According to Jeremy Wakefield, “dancers were stopped in their tracks” (2010).

The tendency toward overlooking Bob Dunn’s work with Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies in country music history is cited by Robert Palmer as being due to the fact that their music was “too ‘hillbilly’ to be taken seriously by jazz scholars” and “too full of regional quirks to be accepted as mainstream pop” (1997). Although history would show that Milton Brown had laid the musical groundwork for what would come to be known as western swing, in their time the Musical Brownies were simply known as an innovative and popular band who mixed influences and repertoire of jazz, blues, Tin Pan Alley, and traditional string band numbers. Brown’s addition of Dunn’s electric steel guitar and the jazz piano of Fred Calhoun to the traditional string band instrumentation of guitar, fiddle, mandolin, and upright bass made his group stand out sonically from other dance bands at the time while still appealing to rural folks familiar with the traditional string band format. Bob Dunn’s ability to use the steel guitar to play both sensitive chordal accompaniment and daring horn-like improvisations made it an indispensable element in the group. Noel Boggs (1917-1974), a steel guitarist who would go on to be a fixture in the western swing orchestras of Bob Wills and Spade Cooley, cited Bob Dunn as his biggest influence and the first jazz steel player he had ever heard (Coffey 2010, 4).

“The Waltz You Saved For Me” shows Dunn’s ability to blend the steel as though it were an additional fiddle. On this track, his steel guitar is almost indiscernible from the fiddles as they play the melody, except for its slightly wider vibrato. Dunn’s modestly embellished restatement of the melody is the first time in the song where the steel guitar stands out

as audible, again with a Hawaiian approach using wide vibrato. Dunn’s newly electrified instrument also allows for an increased sustain of notes.

In drastic contrast, Dunn’s signature showpiece, “Taking Off”, has Dunn playing angular horn-inspired lines over a chord progression also used on “Singin’ the Blues”, a tune often associated with Bix Beiderbecke. Although he is often overshadowed by the great popularizers of the steel guitar like Leon McAuliffe and Jerry Byrd, Dunn’s innovative playing shocked the ears of those hearing it for the first time. If not for Dunn’s virtuosic musicality and knowledge of hillbilly, Hawaiian, jazz, and blues styles, the electrified steel guitar may not have been so easily accepted in western swing music and thus may not have become so embedded in the aural identity of country music.

Conclusions

In summary, the musical reimagining of the steel guitar at the hands of American popular music did not begin with two migrant musicians at a house party in 1929, but instead is the product of thousands of such interactions beginning decades earlier and occurring in all corners of the continent. I hope that I’ve begun to illustrate how the enduring association of the steel guitar with country music and its role as a musical signifier in the genre can be better understood by looking closely at interactions between the instrument and musics of different regions, classes, and races in North America. White country blues, the popular hillbilly music of Jimmie Rodgers, and the proto-western swing of Bob Dunn with Milton Brown are worthy starting points.

After 1935, the electrification and re-purposing of the steel guitar as a feasible vehicle for solo improvisation by artists like Bob Dunn directly led to its use in western swing music and its recognition as an instrument that was essential to the dance bands of wildly popular entertainers like Bob Wills and Spade Cooley. The electrification of the steel guitar, along with innovative use of tone and volume controls, also greatly increased its ability to mimic the most emotive of all instruments: the human voice. The indispensable role of the steel guitar in the music of West Coast country artists like Buck Owens, Marty Stuart, and Dwight Yoakam and their representation of the “Bakersfield Sound” draws heavily on the voice-like qualities of the instrument, as does the country sub-genre of honky-tonk, which emerged in the early 1940s. Honky-tonk, which used the emotional sentiments of the blues along with the musical traits of western swing, used the electrified steel guitar as a signifier of authenticity and as the voice of hardship, lost love, and whiskey-soaked loneliness experienced

by newly urbanized rural Southerners (Jensen 1998, 33-34). By the mid-1940s, the steel guitar, once described as “singing” in Alvino Rey’s big bands, was on its way to being known in the American popular consciousness as the “cryin’ ” guitar of country music.

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Notes

¹ The gottuvadyam is also known as the "chitraveena" and is an Indian stringed instrument that uses an ebony or glass rod to change the pitch of its strings (Garland 2014).

² Garrett (2008) provides an in-depth discussion of the complex power relationships that governed musical and cultural exchanges between Hawaii and the mainland U.S.

³ "Hapa Haole" is a Hawaiian term used to describe "half-foreign" music as well as individuals with mixed ancestry. In this context it refers to Hawaiian songs with English lyrics and structures derived from popular American forms.

⁴ While the date seems almost implausibly early, Troutman provides evidence that Hawaiian musicians under Joseph Puni's management travelled to South Carolina to perform at the Charleston Exposition in 1902 after their previous engagement at the Buffalo Exposition (2013, 32).



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