



in print

The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music. By Jocelyn R. Neal. Indiana University Press, 344 pages, \$55.00 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

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T for Texas, T for Tennessee: Will Jimmie Rodgers' songs live forever?

*Jerry,
My record company... is doing a Jimmie Rodgers tribute record—you don't have to yodel (there's plenty of songs where he doesn't yodel) but if you want to yodel, that's ok too... Anyway if it's not too much to ask, think about a Jimmie song—let me know something in some kind of incalculated amount of time...*

*All the best,
Bob*

The Bob here was Dylan; the Jerry was Garcia. Dylan scratched out the letter on a Beverly Hills entertainment manager's stationery. When he finished the album in 1997, he called it *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers—A Tribute*. Bono was on it. So were Van Morrison, Willie Nelson, and Aaron Neville. John Mellencamp did a song. Jerry Garcia, undaunted, yodeled through “Standin’ on the Corner,” better known as “Blue Yodel No. 9.”

Way before Dylan, Gene Autry covered Jimmie Rodgers. Harry Belafonte did, too. Lynyrd Skynyrd. Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell, Johnny Cash. Merle Haggard released an entire album of Jimmie Rodgers songs. Dolly Parton's cover of “Muleskinner Blues” made her a superstar and redefined what it meant to be a woman in country music.

Rodgers, long dead by the time these stars picked his songs, was tubercular, sickly but swaggering, a traveling medicine-show runaway and sometime railroad worker who, by most accounts, failed at pretty much everything he set out to do. In the 1920s he hopped from one train job to another, shuffling around between tracks and towns until the TB made him too weak. He wanted to be a singing star, but he couldn't read music, could barely keep time, and, the night before he was supposed to record for big-city talent scout Ralph Peer, argued with his band and then broke up the group.

He showed up to the Peer session alone. “All right, George,” he said. (Rodgers called everyone George.) “I'll just sing one by myself.” He'd told Peer he had dozens of songs, but he could only muster two: one maudlin nineteenth-century ballad and another old vaudeville tune that Rodgers biographer Nolan Porterfield calls “a much-worked-over moldy fig.” Neither became much of a hit.

A few months later, in late 1927, he traveled to New York and checked himself into a posh hotel (telling the clerk to bill it to Peer's record company). He called Peer and somehow talked him into another recording session. But something about Rodgers had changed. His guitar was now driving and lively; his voice was confident and infectious. In early 1928—back when selling a hundred thousand records could make you a star—Peer released “Blue Yodel.” It sold more than a million. Rodgers lived only five

more years before the TB did him in, but he recorded often and sold out shows wherever he went. Many people now consider his songs country music's headwaters.

Why does Rodgers' music still resound? Will the Singing Brakeman's songs live forever, despite his yodeling, despite his adenoidal voice, and despite the way his seventy-five-year-old recordings wheeze and hiss and pop?

Today, first-time Jimmie Rodgers listeners tend to really like or really dislike what they're hearing, Jocelyn Neal says. There's not much middle ground. And often, Neal says, people have two reactions to Rodgers: they say that the song they're hearing sounds familiar, and they seem compelled to add that it either is or isn't real country music. Neal has wondered about those reactions for a long time. She studies country music and American popular music, and in her new book, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers*, she traces the lineage of some of Rodgers' most well-known tunes and takes a careful look at his history and legacy to explain why so many of us still relate to his music.

Rodgers was a generalist, an opportunist, working at a time when the term “country music” didn't exist. His songs became the core of country, Neal says, simply because so many generations of musicians and fans that came after Rodgers decided to define them that way. Decades after Rodgers died, Neal says, “Johnny Cash walked out on stage and used just a brakeman's hat and a train lantern as a way of summoning the father of country music from beyond the grave.” Rodgers' songs tend to resurface at pivotal moments in the history of country: when Elvis brought rock 'n' roll to the suburbs, when Dolly Parton declared that she wouldn't be a demure female sidekick, when *Urban Cowboy* brought crossover pop to Nashville, and when *O Brother Where Art Thou?* turned a generation of late-twentieth-century fans on to the old stuff.

Neal explains that Rodgers had a knack for understanding his audience. He adapted his yodel from vaudeville, cadged some lyrics and melodies from black bluesmen, and even reworked sentimental old pop songs that people knew well. He carefully managed his image, dressing in railroad duds, or a cowboy getup,

JASON SMITH



Jocelyn Neal: “Jimmie Rodgers never shied away from a pop-crossover song, he was a master of stagecraft, and he cultivated a signature yodel that served him well—all of which imply that he has the makings of a modern country star.”

or a slick suit and tie. "From the time he was a young teenager," Neal says, "Rodgers knew that his job as an entertainer was to give the audience what they wanted, whatever that may be." He intuitively grasped the music business in a way that many of his contemporaries couldn't: he understood that songs were commercial commodities, and Peer used those songs in a business scheme to maximize profits from rights and royalties.

More than anything, Rodgers' songs endure because of what Neal calls their "irreconcilable dualities." They're built with borrowed phrases and techniques, yet they seem autobiographical. They're a reference to country music's idealized past, but from the get-go they've been a heavily promoted, moneymaking enterprise. "They're the essence of traditional country music, yet they're simultaneously claimed as pop, folk, and rock," Neal says. When Bob Dylan picked up a Jimmie Rodgers song, he instantly aligned himself with Southern, rural, working-class American roots; he evoked an idyllic, mythological past; and he reshaped his own public image, if only slightly, by borrowing the image that Rodgers had created for himself eighty-some years earlier. And he had no trouble convincing a whole CD's worth of stars to do the same. That's as good a measure as any for the power of a Rodgers song. Not bad for a run-down railroad drifter who could never do anything right.

—Jason Smith

Jocelyn Neal is an associate professor of music in the College of Arts and Sciences. Neal's research for this book was supported in part by the David E. Pardue, Jr., and Rebecca S. Pardue faculty fellowship at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities, and by a research and study assignment from the College of Arts and Sciences.

The Rebel Poets of Zen

Cold Mountain Poems. By J.P. Seaton. Shambhala Publications Inc., 126 pages, \$18.95.

The common story is that Han Shan and his sidekick Shih Te were renowned Zen poets who roamed the mountains of southeastern China, scrawling verse on rocks, trees, and sixth-century monasteries. And that myth is probably true. Just not the whole truth.

In *Cold Mountain Poems*, translator J.P. Seaton shares his favorite works of Han Shan and Shih Te while unraveling their ancient tale and eternal appeal.

Han Shan and Shih Te, Seaton points out, are actually pseudonyms for several people who wrote short, sometimes humorous, and often down-to-earth poems over the course of three centuries. They appealed to many people, including religious leaders.

"I believe that the high monks and abbots in China saw the poetry of Han Shan and Shih Te for one of the things it certainly was—an outstanding tool for teaching the basic principles of Buddhism," Seaton says. These religious leaders probably used the power of their church to publish a collection of poems attributed to Han Shan and Shih Te, while adding a few poems of generic Buddhist

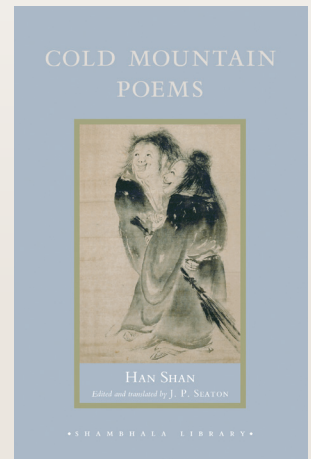
doctrine and dogma for good measure. This monastic seal of approval is probably why poems that had been written on tree trunks and farmers' houses survived the ages, all the way down to the Beat Generation, when poet Gary Snyder translated some of Han Shan's works into English for the first time in 1958.

Whatever the case, the poets put simple Zen concepts, such as sitting in certain poses to achieve meditation, into beautiful verse—even when it's translated into twenty-first-century English.

Han Shan writes:

*I sit beneath the cliff, quiet and alone.
Round moon in the middle of the sky's a bird ablaze:
All things are seen mere shadows in its brilliance,
That single wheel of perfect light...
Alone, its spirit naturally comes clear.
Swallowed in emptiness in this cave of darkest mystery,
Because of the finger pointing, I saw the moon.
That moon became the pivot of my heart.*

—Mark Derewicz



How blue is your yodel?

T for _____ 1 _____, T for _____ 2 _____
T for _____ 3 _____, that gal that made a wreck out of me
If you don't want me mama, you _____ 4 _____
'Cause I can get more women _____ 5 _____
I'm gonna buy me a pistol _____ 6 _____
I'm gonna shoot poor Thelma _____ 7 _____
I'm going where the water drinks like _____ 8 _____
'Cause the Georgia water tastes like _____ 9 _____
I'm gonna buy me a shotgun _____ 10 _____
I'm gonna shoot _____ 11 _____
Rather drink _____ 12 _____, sleep in a _____ 13 _____
Than to be in Atlanta, treated like a _____ 14 _____



- A. dirty dog
- B. turpentine
- C. Tennessee
- D. with a great long shiny barrel
- E. that rounder that stole away my gal
- F. sure don't have to stall
- G. Thelma
- H. hollow log
- I. just as long as I am tall
- J. Texas
- K. cherry wine
- L. than a passenger train can haul
- M. muddy water
- N. just to see her jump and fall

ANSWERS: 11, 2C, 3C, 4F, 5L, 6I, 7N, 8K, 9B, 10D, 11E, 12M, 13H, 14A.

OK

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Jerry,
My record company (A very limited one)
is doing a Jimmie Rodgers tribute
record - you don't have to yodel - there's
plenty of songs where he doesn't yodel) but
if you want to yodel, that's ok too -
Anyway one of the performers on this record will
be me and of course the perfect song for me
is Blue Eyes Joe and it's included with
this letter - Didja hear my version of
Two Soldiers? Anyway if it's not too much
to ask, think about a Jimmie song - let me
know something in some kind of uncalculated
amount of time - whatever you decide
is ok with me -
ACC The Best
Bob

J.P. Seaton is a professor emeritus of Asian studies who taught Chinese in the College of Arts and Sciences.