

MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

Grand Ole Opry at Carnegie Hall. Gaylord Entertainment Company DVD, 2006.

Backstage at the Grand Ole Opry is one of my favorite places in Nashville. After checking in at the security desk, guests are free to wander the maze of hallways that connect the historic dressing rooms. Onstage, guests crowd into seats between the musicians and the red country-barn backdrop, watching the bustle of the show as the curtain rises and falls between segments. Announcers read famous slogans in advertising copy; legendary singers in sequins and rhinestones chat with up-and-coming performers in the wings; the Carol Lee Singers and house band keep the music humming along. Headliners take the stage and crack jokes with the audience, who, in turn, applaud their approval at the beginning of favorite songs. Square dancers kick up their heels while fans gather at the footlights to snap scrapbook pictures. The live broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry on WSM, on the air continuously since 1925, represent a collision of country's past and present in a beloved, nostalgic, and slightly chaotic performance tradition.

When host Vince Gill opened the Grand Ole Opry's eightieth-birthday performance in the Isaac Stern Auditorium at Carnegie Hall on 14 November 2005, he promised the audience, "For those of you that have never had the experience of a Grand Ole Opry performance, that's what we've tried to do for you tonight . . . create what it's like on a Friday or Saturday night in Nashville, Tennessee, home of the Grand Ole Opry." That evening's performance, broadcast on Nashville's WSM and later aired on cable's *Great American Country*, has been released as a commercial ninety-minute DVD. In spite of Gill's opening promise, the DVD version of the concert captures little of the essence of an Opry broadcast. It does, however, provide a fascinating illustration of the country music industry's complex relationship with New York City, and country's long-standing contradictions between desiring mainstream acceptance and wanting to isolate itself in its own traditions.

Tradition is a prominent theme throughout the DVD, which features eighteen performances and short snippets of the artists' stage patter, but omits all of the informality and radio-announcer elements of the standard Opry. Stars of decades past include Country Hall of Fame member Charley Pride, who sings "Kiss an Angel Good Morning," and fellow inductee Little Jimmy Dickens, who romps through a deadpan and musically sloppy version of "May the Bird of Paradise Fly Up Your Nose." Also on the traditional side, Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder fly through a breakneck rendition of the traditional bluegrass tune "Black-Eyed Suzie." Hall of Fame member Bill Anderson sings a duet with Brad Paisley, lamenting the notion that anything could possibly be "Too Country," and Martina McBride pays homage to Tammy Wynette with a gorgeous rendition of "Till I Can Make It on My Own." The finale features the assembled cast in a gospel medley of "I'll Fly Away," "I Saw the Light," and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," a time-honored gesture of country benediction.

On the contemporary side, relative newcomer Trace Adkins opens the concert with "Songs about Me," whose lyrics declare the universal applicability of country music. Superstars Trisha Yearwood and Alan Jackson both adhere to standard

Opry formula by singing one of their first hits (“She’s in Love with the Boy” and “Chattahoochee”), plus a newer radio single. Although Yearwood appears in top vocal form, Jackson’s performance lacks its usual polish. The vocal highlight of the concert is a silky trio from Gill, Krauss, and Skaggs, singing “Go Rest High on that Mountain.” The most unexpected musical moment in the concert occurs when Skaggs invites New York native Andy Statman to play a Klezmer-style clarinet introduction for “Walls of Time.”

Also on the DVD is a nine-minute “Behind the Scenes” documentary offering historical information about the two previous Opry concerts at Carnegie Hall, which occurred in 1947 and 1961. The later and better-known concert, which included Bill Monroe and Patsy Cline, is openly invoked by the 2005 cast when Alison Krauss, dressed in a 1960s-inspired gown, belts out an explicitly retro rendition of Patsy Cline’s “She’s Got You,” and Brad Paisley comments that the performers backstage are examining old photographs from the earlier concert. That 1961 performance happened at a pivotal moment in country’s history: with a new musical style from the late 1950s, producers like Owen Bradley and Chet Atkins were turning out crossover hits, and country music consciously headed uptown. The successful concert in New York City, which columnist Dorothy Kilgallen had predicted would be nothing more than “hicks from the sticks,” proved to be a moment of triumph.

The 2005 Carnegie Hall concert was similarly part of a larger effort to successfully transplant country’s heart and soul in the sophisticated environs of the Big Apple. It occurred within a week-long series of events, collectively marketed as “Country Takes NYC,” and was punctuated by the Country Music Association (CMA) Awards show, aired from Madison Square Garden—the first time the CMAs had ever left Nashville. Toward the same effect as Andy Statman’s appearance in Carnegie Hall, the CMAs attempted to highlight musical connections beyond the borders of country, with Paul Simon and Elton John among the featured performers. Fans were both amused and bemused by the proceedings, particularly when Garth Brooks came out of retirement (again) to sing live from Times Square on the show, a move reminiscent of his 1997 Central Park concert, which represented the farthest inroads country music ever made into New York City.

The sense of folksy insecurity and admiration that country music projects in its relationship with New York, and by extension, Carnegie Hall, is palpable on the DVD. When Skaggs walks onstage, his face registers genuine astonishment, and he whispers, “Wow!” In the short interviews, interspersed on the DVD, the musicians express awe at being in such a storied performance space. Whisperin’ Bill Anderson quips gleefully, “I didn’t have to buy a ticket, and I’m gonna get into Carnegie Hall!” while Gill tells the time-honored joke about how one gets to Carnegie Hall (practice!). Of all the singers, only Paisley successfully breaks through the staid refinement of the concert hall and the propriety of the audience—atypical for an Opry crowd—with his lighthearted stage banter.

Despite the lack of liner notes, which leaves the viewer in want of details, *Grand Ole Opry at Carnegie Hall* offers several excellent musical performances in well-mixed 5.1 Dolby Surround Sound. Today’s students, however, are exposed to many of the same artists performing regularly on network television morning and late-night talk shows. Furthermore, Robert Altman’s film *A Prairie Home*

Companion (2006) paints a far more colorful and representative picture of a live radio show than does this video. Perhaps the DVD's greatest value is as an artifact of the 2005 "Country Takes NYC" publicity effort. Of course, astute fans will note that the CMA Awards were scheduled back in Nashville for 2006, and the Grand Ole Opry still features a down-home red barn on its stage.

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Packing my Library

In reviewing and packing my musicological library in preparation for a move, I came across documentation for a variety of studies and projects from the late 1970s and early 1980s that were based upon an electronic future for musical scholarship. Twenty years ago, such pioneering musicologists as Ian Bent, Barry S. Brook, Jan LaRue, and William Malm were assembling large searchable databases of writings, music, and instruments, even as theorists like Mario Baroni, Allen Forte, and Arthur Wenk were exploring computer technology to analyze and devise "grammars" of melodic construction and to identify and compare pitch-class sets. In those pre-Oakland (barely pre-*Contemplating Music*) days of the American Musicological Society, the gathering of such sources was considered an honorable practice—indeed, we owe the eminently useful RILM to the perspicacious Brook. While these collections of data ostensibly were to enable comprehensiveness in study and serve the purposes of comparative analysis, they ultimately did not lead to interpretation, not at least of the critical type that Joseph Kerman and later Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary were advocating.

It is not my intention to demean or devalue such databases, which still exist and serve as invaluable sources of information. Indeed, I have created a database for the seventy-five years of programs for the Allgemeine Deutsche Musikverein, and RILM still thrives as a resource for scholars. However, the incredible expansion of the internet during the early 1990s enabled a shift in attitudes and practices that changed the way scholars carried out research: you no longer needed to purchase and shuffle CD-ROMs to access various databases; the most varied information became instantly available from any number of sources; the scholar became part of a larger virtual community that interacted through discussion lists, chat rooms, and the like; and creators of scholarly resources took advantage of the new formats to transcend mere web-based duplication of traditional print sources—for example, it was now possible to hear music that was embedded in texts and to link instantaneously to other websites.

I, for one, cautiously entered this new world of musical scholarship on the internet, not least because of the bewildering pace of technological change and its concomitant costs in the early years. However, it is hard to imagine a scholar