

## ***What's In A Name : Country-Rock, or is that Alt. Country*** **– a couple of books reviewed**

**John Einarson “Desperados – The Roots Of Country Rock” Cooper Square Press  
[ISBN 0-8154-1065-4]**

**Peter Doggett “Are You Ready For The Country” Penguin Books [ISBN 0-140-26108-7]**

### **The Writers**

Peter Doggett was born in 1957. Between the years 1982-1999 he was Editor of the UK's Record Collector magazine. **Are You Ready For The Country** is his third book. Doggett made his debut as a biographer in late 1997 with **Lou Reed : Growing Up in Public**. He followed with **Abbey Road/Let It Be** [1998], which was part of a six book series, created by a team of writers, that focused on the making of classic rock albums of the late twentieth century.

John Einarson, a Canadian, currently lives in Winnipeg, Canada. He is a teacher at St. John's Ravenscourt School. Einarson has written for both radio and television and hosted his own series on Canadian rock music history for CBC. An already established writer of books concerning the Canadian music scene – **Neil Young Don't Be Denied – The Canadian Years** [1993] and **Randy Bachman : Takin' Care Of Business** [2001] co-written with Bachman. His tome **For What It's Worth : The History Of Buffalo Springfield** [1997] co-written with band alumni Richie Furay found him moving his focus southward to America.

### **The Books – An Assessment**

As you can tell from the headline title both titles deal with that hackneyed subject, *country-rock*, so if you want to bail out, do so immediately.

Einarson's book focuses specifically on the years of 1963-1973, although his eight page, eleventh chapter, *Epilogue : Return Of The Grievous Angel*, attempts to bring the subject up to date with views from current day, Alt. Country performers such as Mark Olson [ex-Jayhawks], his wife – Victoria Williams, Tony Villanueva [Derailers] and Buddy Woodward [ex-Ghost Rockets]. In that chapter Olson opines “*Basically, he couldn't take care of himself. That kind of soured me holding him up as a role model,*” in relation to having read a book about the life of the *supposed* country rock pioneer, Gram Parsons. Although the book Olson read isn't specifically mentioned, it really can only be Ben Fong Torres' 1991 attempt to chronicle the life of Florida born, Georgia bred, Ingram Cecil Connor III - “**Hickory Wind : The Life And Times Of Gram Parsons**” [Pocket Books ISBN 0-671-70513-X].

It's well documented that Gram Parsons disapproved of the proliferation of the term *country-rock*, but I'd endorse Olson's conclusion about Parsons standing in relation to the history and evolution of the genre. Bankrolled by the family fortune, Parsons was free to indulge in a debauched lifestyle. He did and in 1973 it killed him. For a musician who *supposedly* possessed the vision of *how it should sound*, Parsons possessed feet of clay. In fact, Einarson hints in *Chapter Two, California Bloodlines : 1963-1966*, that Parsons' interest in country music was only sparked in 1965 when the twenty year old enrolled at Harvard and met local guitar player, John Nuese. Earlier that year, Gram had been ensconced in Greenwich Village, with his *strictly folk influenced* quartet, The Shilos, playing local clubs for loose change. Nuese, a long time country fan, fired Parsons' imagination by playing Merle Haggard and Buck Owens records. The rest, is history. Parsons, Nuese, Ian Dunlop and Mickey Gauvin formed The Like, which mutated into the International Submarine Band. The band relocated to the West Coast, Parsons defected to the Byrds, recorded their eponymous 1968 album “**Sweetheart Of The Rodeo,**” and promptly departed when leader Jim “Roger” McGuinn announced the band would tour South Africa. Two Flying Burrito Brothers albums and two solo albums later, he was dead. His legacy amounts to a few interesting recordings. Parsons' collaborator, Chris Hillman [Ex-Byrds, Flying Burrito Bros, Desert Rose Band] and Poco's Rusty Young, express pointedly that history has overblown Parsons' contribution to the genre.

Parsons is however only one player in Einarson's 120,000 word tome. Focussing mostly on the Pacific Coast, and the City of Angels in particular, he neatly weaves together a tale describing how the major [and minor] players, drawn from across the whole of North America gravitated to the city. As the book opens, it's the early sixties, and the nearby City of Bakersfield is an already established centre for country music, albeit founded upon rhythms imported decades earlier, by migrating musicians from Texas [inclusive of that essential Mexican influences] and Oklahoma. The acoustic folk explosion of the early sixties gave way a couple of years later to folk-rock. Soon tiring of that fad, country music became the next experimental area

for a whole swathe of young players. Einarson succinctly points out how it attracted musicians from two previously diverse musical camps once *country-rock* became an established brand. There were rock musicians who now wanted to play country and folk musicians who were trading up from banjo to guitar and acquiring *tasty* country licks.

As **Desperados** reveals, the *country-rock* scene was a heaving, incestuous mass, as the first generation of players and groups who came to California enjoyed their fleeting moment of glory, split up, reformed in a new aggregation for *fifteen* minutes, and then repeated the process again. In that regard, Einarson barely misses a link in the chain. Some aggregations only made one album, while Poco made in excess of a dozen. As noted earlier, to all intents and purposes, Einarson draws his book to a close in 1973. It was the year in which *pioneers* Parson and Clarence White died, and David Geffen took over reins at Elektra Records from *the visionary* Jac Holzman. Eventually Elektra merged with his Asylum label, and in the process he shut down Michael Nesmith's, Holzman backed, *experimental* Countryside label. While it's water under the bridge now, one question remains unanswered - "*what might have been created musically*?" It was also the year that "**Desperado**," the *sophomore/concept* effort by the Eagles appeared, an album that failed to build on the gold status of their self-titled debut collection and the *countrified* hit singles it yielded - "Take It Easy" and "Witchy Woman." A couple of albums *further down the road*, their musical pendulum had swung from country to rock, and the Eagles became mega-stars. Significantly, only one *country-rock* band has achieved Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame status – the Eagles. In time, Henley's tune "Desperado" achieved cult status. The next course on the menu, as served by that aggressive marketing machine – Nashville, was homogenised *new country*. A concoction that drew inspiration from the softer face of *country-rock*, but that's a whole other can of worms.....which is dealt with in Doggett's effort.

If you compare Doggett's book with Einarson's, there are a number of structural similarities. Ostensibly written at the same time, an ocean apart, the chapters of both books draw their titles from the name of albums that contributed to the establishment of the genus – *country-rock*. In Doggett's case, he also employs song and movie titles, while subjectively his text strays into many other branches of country music. Around 60,000 words and 150 pages of Doggett's 175,000 word work cover the same time period, players and location as our man from Canada. In that regard it's obvious which book tackles the 1966-1973 *reign of country-rock* in depth.

Doggett does not employ a chronological timeline in his work. Sub-divided into *Part 1 Country-Rock*, *Part 2 Country Into Rock* and *Part 3 Parallel Lines*, numerous chapters in *Part 2*, pre-date those in *Part 1*. The contents of Doggett's book boil down to a series of *isolated* essays – chapters - that focus, either on a particular part of a performer's career to date, or a group of musicians and bands who were contemporaries – sic. *Part 2 – Chapter 26 : A Star Is Born, Kris Kristofferson 1965-1978*. Meanwhile *Part 1 – Chapter 8 : A Trip In The Country, Country-Rock Crosses America 1966-1973* focuses on Nashville bands Area Code 615 and Barefoot Jerry, and solo acts as *musically* diverse as Joan Baez, Janis Joplin, Neil Young, John Stewart and Phil Ochs. Doggett has researched his subject well, but not at any great depth, and unlike Einarson, the Brit makes no attempt to draw out what results from the cross-pollination of generations of North America musicians. Basically, he delivers the chapter and gets the hell out of there. In *Part 3* Doggett brings the story up to date and the current Alt. Country scene. **No Depression**, which he name checks, is probably the principle publication to pioneer the growth of the Alt. Country movement. Curiously. from the outset, their advertising policy has been "*everything is Alt. Country*." As for *Part 3 - Chapter 41 : Lone Star State Of Mind, The Texas Tradition 1970-1999*, at nine pages in length, it only scuffs the surface and laughably undersells a highly creative group of musicians. Significantly for that scene, there's no mention of Jimmy LaFave. Eric Taylor is mentioned on page 470, and immediately dismissed with "*Taylor's career foundered after their marriage collapsed*." Nanci Griffith and Eric parted in the late seventies. Through the eighties and into the nineties he furnished Griffith's albums with many significant songs, did not record for fifteen years, by choice – his choice, and since 1995 has enjoyed a renaissance in his profile in the process releasing three albums. He is one of America's greatest living songwriters.....like Doggett's book, that is only an *opinion*.

On the plus side, both books offer a Selected Discography of influential *country-rock* releases [Part 1 of Doggett's discography is similar in content to Einarson's], while Doggett's features a comprehensive and useful Index. Both books feature a series of black and white pictures, with the Canadian offering 16 pages, while Doggett's only contains half that number.

As an introduction to country music that has principally *not been created in Nashville*, **Are You Ready For The Country** is a fine though occasionally shallow overview, while **Desperados** is the well told story of *the*

*rise and fall* of the genus, *country-rock*. In support of his book, Doggett has compiled a two CD, various artists collection titled **Are You Ready For The Country**.

Arthur Wood  
Kerrville Kronikles 11/01  
1600 words