



GARTH BROOKS, NEW COUNTRY, AND ROCK'S INFLUENCE

by Jocelyn R. Neal

“Being the youngest of six kids, my influences come from all over the board,” explained Garth Brooks. “I particularly liked James Taylor, Dan Fogelberg, Elton John, Journey, Boston, Kansas, . . . Janis Joplin, . . . Styx, and Queen.” From the reigning star of country music, such an unabashed declaration of musical pedigree was shocking. Country music had long emphasized its distinction from rock music and had placed tremendous value on singers touting traditional country music influences. But here, instead, was a bold confession of rock and pop influences, near heresy from the traditional country perspective, but music to the ears of the 1990s fan.

In the early 1990s, country music embraced Garth Brooks and a style known as New Country that infused the genre with many of the musical sounds and performance practices of stadium rock bands. The recordings featured more aggressive vocal performances, increased emphasis on drums and bass, plenty of rock-derived electric guitar solos, and more overt influences from gospel and R&B. The accompanying music videos had higher production values, globally oriented story lines, and more pop choreography. The stage shows eschewed any homespun feel, aiming instead for more spectacle and sensory experiences by employing the types of special effects including pyrotechnics that had become commonplace with the rock bands of the previous decade—Garth Brooks famously even used a rigging to fly out over the crowd during a concert in Texas Stadium. Using this formula, country music shed many of the hayseed-hick associations that had kept it marginalized from mainstream popular culture.

With this rock-influenced approach to making country music, Garth Brooks garnered unprecedented success. In 1992, his third album, *Ropin' the Wind*, landed at number one on *Billboard's* chart—the pop chart, that is, not just the country chart. And to critics' surprise, it held onto that spot through a much-anticipated release by Guns N' Roses, and then surged back to reclaim the top spot after only brief displacement by U2 and Michael Jackson. This was big news: *Rolling Stone* covered it in the magazine's “rock 'n' roll” section, declaring it a case of “David and Goliath, a pudgy country singer from Yukon, Oklahoma, had dethroned the King of Pop.”

Part of country's rise to prominence in the early 1990s was attributable to other factors, including changes in both technology and national politics. In 1991, *Billboard* began

using a company called SoundScan to track sales of music, and their new, electronically collected data revealed that country music was far more popular than the industry had previously realized when sales reporting had been subject to the musical prejudices of record store clerks. Country's popularity also got a boost from the politics of the early 1990s, a time when Middle America latched onto music that purported to represent suburban, middle-class, and working-class values and a (mostly) white identity. These were the years when America elected a Southerner as president, began paying attention to the "soccer mom" demographic in its political rhetoric, and faced an economic recession that directed sympathetic attention to the working class. Country music fit well in those larger trends.

The net result from the change in both sound and political context was that New Country gained tremendous market share, drawing audiences who had previously been self-declared rock fans. The Recording Industry Association of America's sales data, for instance, showed that in 1989 (the year of Garth Brooks's debut), rock music accounted for 41.7 percent of all music sales, and country for a mere 7.3 percent. Four years later, at the height of Brooks's prominence, rock's market share had dropped to 30.2 percent, while country had boomed to 18.7 percent. One well-supported explanation was that kids who had grown up on Boston, Journey, and Queen in the '70s and '80s were now middle-aged adults with kids and houses in suburbia, and Garth Brooks's music appealed to them far more than the contemporaneous rock.

New Country of the 1990s was not the first time that country and rock had intersected. In the mid-1950s, Elvis Presley and other early rockabilly stars emerged directly out of the country music industry and often toured and performed on country shows and with stars of the Grand Ole Opry. Many of the biggest country stars in the 1970s including Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Conway Twitty, George Jones, and Kenny Rogers had begun their careers in rock, and they retained varying degrees of that musical history throughout their careers. Other points of convergence included the music of country rockers such as the Byrds and southern rockers such as Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Marshall Tucker Band, most notably Charlie Daniels, whom rock fans think of as a rock musician, and whom country fans think of as a country musician. In the early 1980s, country artists including Dolly Parton, the band Alabama, and most especially Barbara Mandrell scored crossover pop hits with plenty of rock influences, continuing that same pattern.

Even George Strait, the biggest star of country music in the 1980s, confessed that he had grown up listening

to rock, notably the Beatles. But, unlike Garth Brooks, in interviews George Strait explained he had fallen in love with the music of Merle Haggard, George Jones, and Bob Wills—traditional icons of country music—and essentially left rock behind. The country music landscape that George Strait shaped in the 1980s was defined mainly by the revival of country styles from the past: western swing, Bakersfield music, the sounds of twangy honky-tonk. That "neotraditionalist" era, as it was called, was the launchpad for Garth Brooks, which made his open embrace of rock seem all the more radical.

Brooks destabilized the idea that country was distinct and different from other genres with his open acknowledgement that he was drawing from rock roots every bit as much as from George Jones and George Strait (his other two often-declared influences). By extension, Brooks's attitude suggested he knew his fans also listened to and liked more than just country music. This was a sufficiently novel idea that the press routinely commented on Brooks's habit of covering Bob Seger's "Night Moves" and the Georgia Satellites' "Keep Your Hands to Yourself" in concert. As his career evolved, Brooks continued to explore rock influences, even creating a fictional rock star named Chris Gaines, and, in 2013, releasing a career retrospective box set, *Blame It All on My Roots*, whose title was a lyric lifted from his most famous country anthem, "Friends in Low Places," but that featured two new discs of Brooks covering rock, pop, and soul numbers that he claimed as a native part of his "musical roots."

In the wake of Brooks's paradigm-shifting albums, other musicians and producers from the rock realm migrated into country music. The most influential of these was producer Robert John "Mutt" Lange, whose credentials included production for AC/DC, Def Leppard, and the Cars. Lange scored unprecedented success by injecting country diva Shania Twain's music with rock and dance-pop sensibilities, developments that further blurred the lines between country and other genres. Since 2000, plenty of other rock musicians, notably Bon Jovi, Sheryl Crow, Darius Rucker, and Robert Plant, have experimented with country recordings and, in some instances, even shifted their main musical identities to country. In more recent years, some mainstream country artists have imported hip-hop production and rapping techniques, with a few going even further and collaborating with artists across hip-hop/country lines.

All of these developments reinforce the idea that borrowing across genres is a time-honored source of innovation in all of popular music, even in musical genres such as country that espouse the importance of tradition and of remaining distinct from mainstream rock and pop. For

Garth Brooks in particular, his public avowal of rock as a major influence ironically helped him become the biggest-selling *country* artist of all time and injected country music with a boost in popularity that launched it into the center of mainstream popular culture.

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