Hillbilly Music & Early Live Radio Programming in Bowling Green & Glasgow, Kentucky: Country Music as a Local Phenomenon

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HILLBILLY MUSIC AND EARLY LIVE RADIO PROGRAMMING IN BOWLING GREEN AND GLASGOW, KENTUCKY: COUNTRY MUSIC AS A LOCAL PHENOMENON

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

James S. Nelson

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HILLBILLY MUSIC AND EARLY LIVE RADIO PROGRAMMING IN BOWLING GREEN AND GLASGOW, KENTUCKY: COUNTRY MUSIC AS A LOCAL PHENOMENON

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HILLBILLY MUSIC AND EARLY LIVE RADIO IN BOWLING GREEN AND GLASGOW, KENTUCKY: COUNTRY MUSIC AS A LOCAL PHENOMENON

James S. Nelson January, 1994 96 pages

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In this study, the author examines the development of country music in the area surrounding Bowling Green and Glasgow, Kentucky, from approximately 1930 to 1960 and its relation to the newly emerging medium of radio. Emphasis is placed on several performers whose careers were linked to the radio stations which began to broadcast in Bowling Green and Glasgow during the 1940s.

In the past, country music scholarship has tended to focus on phonograph records as a source of material for study and as the primary means of musical transmission. As a result, the careers of many of the lesser known artists were overlooked simply because they never made a record. The writer looks at country music as a local phenomenon with live radio broadcasts and personal appearances as the primary mode of transmission. Data were collected from tape recorded interviews and written sources, including various archival sources—old newspapers, fan magazines, and assorted ephemera—and used to outline the careers of several performers associated with WLBJ and WKCT in Bowling Green and WKAY in Glasgow.
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INTRODUCTION

In this study, I explore the development of country music in southcentral Kentucky from approximately 1930 to 1960. As a research project, it began as a result of my long-term fascination with traditional Anglo-American fiddle music. What originated as a search for old time fiddlers grew into an investigation of a different sort. Beginning with Tompkinsville fiddler and banjo player Jim Bowles, I noticed that all the old time musicians with whom I had contact reported that they had played what they called "old time country" or "hillbilly" music on the radio in Glasgow or Bowling Green at one time or another in the 1940s or 1950s. These stories both intrigued me and reinforced my suspicions that country music has always existed on more than just one level, transcending the distinction that is often made between popular culture and folk culture. First, country music has long existed as a form of popular music with close ties to a centralized industry, the recording industry, aimed at a wide and demographically diverse audience. On another level, though, it may be considered a form of vernacular music created and performed within an
identifiable folk group, independent of any centralized music industry (Averill 1974).

Before formally undertaking this project, I discovered, through serendipity, some articles relating the histories of live country music radio programs in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Roanoke, Virginia, (Tyler 1981; Lornell 1987). As my interest focused more and more on country music as a localized phenomenon, I became convinced that to get a detailed account of its history, one must begin the investigation at the local level. Such an approach is somewhat of a departure from much of previous country music scholarship. In the past, examination of hillbilly music and its performers focused primarily on phonograph records, based perhaps, on the assumption that commercial recordings adequately chronicled the genre and its artists. While I would not challenge the value of phonograph recordings as useful documents in the study of country music, I would argue that to overemphasize their importance will provide distorted results and ignore all those whose music never found its way onto a record. Southcentral Kentucky seemed a good place to test my conjecture, with plenty of opportunity to research the subject at hand. Following my hunches, I began my explorations. The result is this thesis.

Country music has been an important ingredient in the cultural fabric of the United States since at least the early 1920s. Over the past fifty years or so this music
which began as a home-based, informal style of musical expression has changed in dramatic ways, stylistically, and has given birth to an industry which, in the years since the years World War II, has become a national commercial enterprise (Spielman 1975:278). Perhaps it is because of the undeniable commercial nature of country music that folklore scholars have only begun to study it seriously since the 1960s. Even then it was often not without reservation. One folklorist commenting on this subject noted that, for a long time, country music scholarship undertaken by those in his discipline was "mostly of the 'can-we-find-the-traditional-tunes-here' sort" (Ivey 1974).

I am not presenting that type of study. To focus on "traditional" content is not the purpose here and may be irrelevant in general as it has been shown that popular and folk elements in country music have existed side by side for so long that they have become nearly indistinguishable (Cohen 1970; Wiggins 1979). To quarrel over such terminology is to miss the point. Robert Cogswell argues for an approach to country music scholarship which "urges a widening of perspectives in regard to those absolutist conceptions which have created a strict dichotomy between the study of folk music and consideration of other cultural elements which have historically coexisted and maintained a mutual influence relationship with the oral tradition"
(1973). If we accept this point of view, then country music becomes a proper subject of study in its own right.

This thesis documents a tradition of country music in southcentral Kentucky covering a period of roughly thirty years, between 1930 and 1960, although the most of the activity took place between the mid-1930s and 1955 during the era of live radio broadcasts in the region. This tradition was one in which the primary participants were rarely, if ever, full-time musicians. Very few had their music documented on commercial recordings. To keep the project within manageable limits, the central point of examination focused on musicians who were active on two radio stations in Bowling Green, WLBJ and WKCT, and one in Glasgow, WKAY.

The research was conducted on two principal fronts. One entailed a series of tape recorded interviews. The other involved a search for print materials that might contain articles, pictures, and advertisements dealing with local radio programs and country music performers. I felt that this second route might be fruitful because radio stations at times published daily program schedules in local newspapers in the 1930s and into the 1950s. I also sought out radio-related magazines aimed at rural audiences, country music fans in particular, that were published in the 1930s and 40s. These searches proved to be quite difficult and, at times, frustrating. The published schedules were
very vague and tended to leave one guessing about just what was being broadcast. It was often impossible to determine the content of a program by the listing in the newspaper.

The radio magazines were only a little more useful. However, a souvenir book containing biographical sketches on musician and promoter, Noble (Uncle Bozo) Carver, was valuable as it provided detailed information on others he had worked with over the years. For the most part, though, the information I obtained during the research was garnered through a series of interviews with a number of individuals who were active as radio performers, or who were friends, family, or fans. With this approach come some limitations. Memories tend to fade over the span of fifty years. Information is sometimes not forthcoming because people often will not offer material about which they are not specifically asked. Despite this, however, I was given leads to follow up even as I was nearly done writing.

This study represents an attempt to draw attention to a relatively under-researched facet of country music’s development and to argue that it is relevant to folklore studies. Perhaps in this way, this thesis is somewhat innovative. Though folk music in southcentral Kentucky has been the subject of a number of papers, the tradition of country music itself has never been a central point of study. One of the subjects of this study, Sammy Walker, served as an example in an earlier study that explored
psychological and social forces that motivate people to play
music (Feintuch 1983). Another more common type of approach
has been to focus on individual performers, such as Uncle
Henry and the Kentucky Mountaineers, Henry Bandy, or Whitey
Stearns, discussing their careers and repertoires (Thompson
and Montell 1969; Greene 1972; Guthrie 1972).

Several studies discuss the vocal and instrumental
music traditions once common in the region (Chamberlain
1940; Calhoun 1941; Harbison 1971). These are basically
collections of folksongs and fiddle tunes. For the most
part, the commercial country music tradition is overlooked,
except as something that existed as a corrupting influence
on "pure" folk traditions. These studies are interesting
for the way they describe the social context of which the
music was a part. Depicted in each case was a scenario
virtually identical to the ones described to me by my
informants.

What this study does not present is the comprehensive
history of country music in southcentral Kentucky. Nor
should it be viewed as a complete survey of the region. I
have specifically focused on three radio stations--WLBJ and
WKCT in Bowling Green, and WKAY in Glasgow--and the
performers involved with them. I selected these stations
because they were the first to broadcast live country music
locally in southcentral Kentucky, setting the trend for
other stations that followed--in Scottsville, Franklin,
Columbia, and elsewhere. Rather than viewing this study as exhaustive, perhaps it should be considered as preliminary, an example of an approach that could be applied throughout the region.

This thesis is presented in three parts. The first chapter includes a general overview of country music scholarship and discussion of various trends, resulting problems, and misconceptions, placing the present study into its proper historical context. Included is discussion of the interrelationship between the development of radio and country music. The remaining chapters present the stories of those musicians who were active participants in the era of live country music radio in southcentral Kentucky. In Chapter Two, the focus is the musicians who were connected with WLBJ and WKCT in Bowling Green. Chapter Three is directed toward those who were featured on WKAY in Glasgow.
In the mid-1920s a new industry was emerging, based upon the propagation of a predominantly Southern and rural-based music by means of radio broadcasts and phonograph records. There is some evidence, though, that this music, which would come to be known variously as "hillbilly," "old familiar tunes," "mountaineer songs," and eventually, in the 1940s, "country," was known to the general public and may have been undergoing some degree of popularization two decades earlier. Just after the turn of the century, Emma Bell Miles wrote a piece that was published in *Harper's Magazine* that may have been the earliest description of hillbilly music to appear in print. She wrote...

... There is hidden among the mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas a people of whose inner nature and its musical expression almost nothing has been said. The music of the Southern mountaineer is not only peculiar, but like himself, peculiarly American. (1904)
In her article she went on to discuss the special status held by fiddlers and banjo players within the community and described the performance and context of the music as she witnessed it—that is, at dances and house parties.

A somewhat similar piece appeared in *The Journal of American Folklore* five years later written by Louise Bascom (1909). That article describes another medium of public musical performance in the southern Appalachians, the old time fiddlers convention, and presents some descriptions of mountaineer men and women and their musical performances. Both articles contain references to dance tunes and transcriptions of songs which by the 1930s had been distributed far beyond the mountains by means of commercial phonograph records.

Although material dealing with country music began to appear quite early in the popular press, it was not until the 1960s that folklorists, historians, and others began to direct any serious attention to the music’s history and development. Interestingly, several of these pre-1960 articles regarding early country music have been collected and reprinted in Linnel Gentry’s *Encyclopedia of Country Western and Gospel Music* (1969). Since that time, remarkable strides have been made in the field of country music scholarship, although early on scholarly neglect was an oft-repeated lamentation.
In his ground-breaking article, "Folk and Hillbilly Music: The Background of Their Relation" (1966), Fred Hoeptner makes a clear distinction between "hillbilly" and other forms of country music, an important point that will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. Hoeptner notes that hillbilly music has been ignored by musicologists, folklorists, and other scholars and suggests several reasons for this neglect. He asserts that because record companies often targeted very specific audiences, those persons most likely to address the subject, early students of folksong, may not even have been aware that hillbilly music existed on records or otherwise. If they were aware, they may have simply dismissed the subject entirely due to the fact that the music was indisputably linked to a commercial industry. Hoeptner argues further that another possible reason for a lack of written material dealing with hillbilly music was that the music’s main audience, which he saw as "the common folk class of white people in the southeastern United States," lacked the "requisite intellectual curiosity, or were not educated enough" to be able to do the required research and to then write about it.

Hoeptner’s first argument, that folksong collectors may not have been interested in or aware of hillbilly music, is quite plausible. This notion has been commented on elsewhere. Anne and Norm Cohen, in response to Hoeptner’s
article, suggest several reasons for this phenomenon (1977). They argue that Anglo-American folk music is essentially made up of two components—a private or "domestic" tradition and a public or "assembly" tradition. The domestic tradition consists primarily of the kind of music that people perform at home: ballads, lullabies and children’s songs. The assembly tradition consists of music performed in the context of larger public events such as weddings, local dances, fiddle contests, political rallies, and professional concerts. Record companies drew from the assembly tradition. Because collectors did not attend, or were not interested in events associated with the assembly tradition and most often visited people in their homes, they usually heard the kind of music that individuals performed while at home.

Hoeptner's other argument, that the "folk" are not capable of doing the necessary research, is tainted by some unpleasant stereotyping and over-generalizations. In addition to its elitist coloring, this line of reasoning is undermined by the fact that it completely overlooks the efforts of the cadre of hillbilly music enthusiasts and record collectors, who, by sharing their knowledge and materials, compiling discographies, and publishing their research in non-academic periodicals such as Disc Collector and Record Research beginning in the early 1950s, have
provided much of the raw materials used later by scholars researching the subject (Wilgus 1971).

In another pioneering article discussing the state of country music scholarship, folklorist Ed Kahn argued that in both quality and quantity, the state of country music research lagged far behind that of jazz, blues, and other popular music forms, placing the blame on societal attitudes and the country music industry itself. He wrote

From the earliest days of recordings of rural white music, it has been regarded as part of the industry that makes money, but does not contribute to American culture. This early attitude undoubtedly reflected the feelings of the time, but in subsequent years the industry has done nothing to change this attitude. Perhaps no other area of popular culture is so lacking in self-respect. And the public image of country music certainly will not change radically until the self-image of the industry itself changes. For the most part, the executives, musicians, and promoters feel that they are dealing with a parasitic area of popular culture. Not even the first step has been taken to bring respect to this large segment of the American economy that has existed for so long without attempting in some
way to understand or explain itself. The reasons for such behavior are complex indeed, but to some extent are explicable in terms of the marginal light in which the country music business has viewed itself. Only those industries that feel they make some contribution to American life have felt it necessary to have their story explained. Area after area of popular culture has seen to it that popular histories are written, but country music has not even managed one good article!
(1965)

It was not long before the state of affairs surrounding country music scholarship had been altered dramatically and irrevocably. These changes had their beginnings three momentous events which acted as a springboard for future research and publication: the founding of the John Edwards Memorial Foundation, the publication of the Journal of American Folklore "Hillbilly Issue" in 1965, and the publication of Bill C. Malone's Country Music U.S.A. in 1968.

From Australia, John Edwards was an enthusiastic record collector whose primary interests were American hillbilly and blues recordings of the 1920s and 1930s. He also did extensive discographical and biographical research pertaining to these early recordings and the artists who
made them and published articles in various record collector periodicals prior to his untimely death in 1960 (Greenway 1961). As requested in Edwards's will, his record collection and related papers were sent to the American record collector Eugene Earle, who with fellow collector/scholars Archie Green, Fred Hoeptner, Ed Kahn, and D.K. Wilgus established the John Edwards Memorial Foundation (JEMF) in July 1962. The Foundation's primary objective was

To further the serious study, public recognition, and preservation of that form of American folk music commonly known as country, western, country-western, hillbilly, bluegrass, mountain, cowboy, old time, and sacred; to study and preserve parallel material referred to as race, blues, and gospel. (Earle 1971)

The JEMF became a major clearing house for popular and academic researchers. It published a quarterly journal, made available a series of reprinted materials dealing with country music, and issued a series of bio-discographical monographs that focused on the careers of such artists as Molly O'Day, Uncle Dave Macon, and Johnny Cash. The full impact that the JEMF had on the direction and content of country music scholarship has yet to be ascertained.
In 1965 the *Journal of American Folklore* published the now-renowned "Hillbilly Issue." This special issue of *JAF* represented a milestone on several fronts. It signaled the beginning of the serious examination of hillbilly music by scholarly researchers, folklorists in particular. The issue contained a number of firsts, including a biographical sketch of Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers--a string band well known through a number of best-selling 78 rpm records made in the 1920s and 1930s (Cohen 1965), an essay that explored the origins of the term "hillbilly" and its relationship to the music with which it became associated (Green 1965), and an article which examined bluegrass music as a specific subgenre of country music (Smith 1965). The "Hillbilly Issue" also contained essays suggesting areas for further study, thus setting the tone for the research that was to follow (Hickerson 1965; Wilgus 1965).

Bill C. Malone's *Country Music U.S.A.* ([1968] 1985) was an achievement of far-ranging significance. In what is the most comprehensive historical treatment of the subject to date, Malone traces the development of country music from its roots in the folk culture of the rural South through its rapid commercialization and nationalization by means of radio broadcasts and phonograph records in the period preceding the Great Depression through the years immediately following World War II. Along the way, there is discussion and detailed, careful analysis of the various hybridized
variations that the music has taken, including bluegrass, western swing, and honky tonk, for example. *Country Music U.S.A.* has done more than any other work to bring the study of commercial country music to the attention of folklorists, historians, and other interested scholars and has proven to be both a valuable wellspring of data and a source of inspiration for further study.

The past twenty-five years have witnessed an enormous amount of new research, utilizing a variety of approaches under the banners of a number of disciplines. There have been textual studies by popular culture scholars and sociologists, in which lyrics of country songs are examined and analyzed to determine what, if any, relationship exists between country music as expressed through its lyrics and the values and world view of its audience. Not surprisingly, this type of investigation has failed to reach a consensus regarding the belief systems of country music listeners. In one such study, researchers looked for, and found, indications that country songs are filled with racist and otherwise reactionary imagery that supposedly reflects and sustains the beliefs of those who make up its audience (Lund 1972). Others have concluded that country music does not change or reinforce attitudes. Instead, it offers a symbolic world view with which the audience may identify (Buckley 1979; DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco 1972).
On occasion, the field of cultural geography has intersected with country music scholarship on occasion as well. The result has been a range of research, including a study of the geographical distribution of bluegrass music and migration patterns of its musicians (Carney 1978), and an examination of the birth places of country music performers which concluded that "country music has been and continues to be made by performers born in the fertile crescent of country music" extending from West Virginia to Texas (Peterson and Davis 1975).

The performer biography, probably more than any other type of work, has come to the forefront of country music-related literature. There may many reasons why, but one is certain. The biographical study is the point at which the scholar's true colors as a fan of the performer and the music are revealed. These studies are most often labors of love and range from articles dealing with the careers of lesser known artists, such as the Buchanan Brothers (Marshall 1974), to book-length works telling the life stories of prominent figures in the music's development, such as Jimmie Rodgers (Paris and Comber 1977; Porterfield 1979). When viewed collectively, this area of scholarship is particularly useful because it provides insight into ways in which the music itself has evolved and the music industry has developed over the years.
There are works outlining the lives and music of the early pioneers of country music such as Fiddlin' John Carson (Wiggins 1986), others dealing with more modern innovators like Hank Williams (Williams 1981), and still others that cover a broad spectrum, from old time musicians to modern country performers, sometimes in one volume (Malone and McCulloh 1975). Of special interest are those autobiographical writings, such as Alton Delmore's *Truth Is Stranger Than Publicity* (1977) and Grandpa Jones's *Everybody's Grandpa: Fifty Years Behind the Mike* (1984), which help the reader to gain a comprehension of country music history that can only come from the experience of an insider.

Academic research dealing with country music itself and the music as a manifestation of something else has seen a dramatic increase since the days of Hoeptner's and Kahn's laments to the contrary. While this proliferation of information has been, on the whole, a positive phenomenon which has done much to increase our understanding of this previously neglected aspect of American culture, it has served as well to perpetuate some commonly accepted fallacies about the nature of country music, its audience, and its performers. Many of these misconceptions are merely over-generalizations and indeed may have some basis in fact. To further explore these misunderstandings, we need to
examine some of the early investigations in which attempts were made to create a working definition of hillbilly music.

In "Folk and Hillbilly Music: The Background of Their Relation" (1966), Hoeptner carefully differentiates between the terms "country" and "hillbilly." He sees "country" as an umbrella term that is inclusive of a whole field of music including hillbilly, western swing, and "modern" country. For the purposes of his argument these distinctions are important and necessary, and it is definitely "hillbilly" or early country music that interests Hoeptner. Thus his completed definition of hillbilly music is "that style of music native to the culture of the common class of white people in the southeastern United States, played by stringed instruments, and relatively little influenced by musical developments occurring after 1941."

D.K. Wilgus, writing during the same time period, offered a similar though more expanded definition of "hillbilly":

1. Of or pertaining to commercialized folk or folkish songs (or performers thereof) largely derived from or aimed at white folk culture of the southern United States, beginning in 1923. 2. Of or pertaining to that style--a blend of Anglo-Irish-Negro folksong and American popular song--on which the commercial tradition was based (1959:433).
One notices some similar elements beginning to recur here. Archie Green, in his pivotal essay, "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," suggests that "hillbilly music" was born out of "the marriage of a commercial industry--phonograph records and some units of show business--with traditional Appalachian folksong." He further allows that the term "hillbilly" may be applied to all white commercial country music, or it may be "equated simply with one limited type or recent period" (1965).

A common idea, that country music is a white, southern form of musical expression transmitted primarily by means of phonograph records, appears in each of the definitions presented here and has been perpetuated in many other works as well. This definition is made up of the most commonly held myths or fallacies regarding country music. The most significant and prevalent of these fallacies is the notion that country music is solely a product of the rural South.

In the forefront among those who advance the so-called "southern thesis" is Bill Malone, who has stated that "country music is not merely a facet of southern culture, but is . . . southern culture's chief industry ([1968] 1985:xi). It is Malone who has done more to elucidate the process by which country music emerged out of many divergent elements which, upon colliding head on, gave us southern folk culture (Malone [1968] 1985:2-3). He argues that the South, especially the Appalachian South, both as a source of
musical ideas and as a set of popular images, exerted a tremendous influence on American popular music long before country music and its musicians gained recognition on a national level. Because of the popular perception of the Southeast as isolated and somehow embodying many of the values and the simplicity of an earlier era in American life, the region became a symbolic repository of what remained of the Anglo-Saxon core of American culture. It was here that folklorists and folksong collectors focused the bulk of their energy and attention in the early days of the profession (Malone 1979:18-29). This notion has been and, in some cases, continues to be widely accepted without question and has long been promoted by some in the music industry, the academic community, and especially the folk music revival, which has looked primarily to the Southeast in its search for inspiration and material (Kingman 1979:180; Malone 1993:106-108).

The "southern thesis" has been disputed in recent years by folklorists who argue that to define country music as strictly southern ignores a significant amount of evidence to the contrary. D.K. Wilgus has stated that "long before 1941 hillbilly music was a commonplace in both the rural and urban North" (1970). Roderick J. Roberts argues that "it is difficult to single out any rural, agricultural areas on the continent, north of Mexico, where commercial country music has not caught on" (1978). Folklorist Simon Bronner also
challenges the southern thesis, arguing that it is based upon inaccurate and incomplete data (1978). These assertions certainly have their merits and have found corroboration elsewhere—for example, in studies examining barn dance radio programs originating in the Midwest and the significant role they played in the popularization of country music before World War II (Patterson 1975; Tyler 1982; Travers and Maring 1983).

There is another widely held misconception about country music that, while not exactly pertinent to the present study, certainly deserves some mention: the assumption that this music is, and always has been, played by white people for a white audience. A closer look, however, reveals that this assumption may not be as universally valid as it first appears. Research has shown that an African-American string band tradition, called "black hillbilly music" by some and which shared much in common with the white tradition, flourished in parts of the Upland South as recently as the 1940s (Wolfe 1987; Jamieson 1988; Lightfoot 1990:127-130; Morton and Wolfe 1991:17-18). A recent issue of The Journal of Country Music chronicles the careers of a number of African-Americans who have made attempts to break into mainstream country music since the 1960s (Bowman 1992; Millard 1992; Woods 1992). While questions about regional or racial exclusivity may not seem germane concerning the discussion at hand, they are directly
related to another popular misconception regarding the history and evolution of country music and one that is central to this study.

It has been widely assumed that the musical legacy preserved and documented on phonograph records presents a complete and reliable accounting of the story of country music from its folk roots through its growth into a commercial industry. That there always have been others besides Southern whites playing country music is an indication that this assumption is simply not true. I am not suggesting, however, that phonograph records have little significance in documenting materials of particular interest to folklorists.

On the contrary, among the material found on early phonograph records is a large body of instrumental folk music and folk song, including all manner of country music, that is readily available for study and analysis. Indeed, 78 rpm recordings have been used as a source of material for studies of artists and their repertoires (Rorrer 1982; Tribe 1975), comparative studies of Child ballads (McCulloh 1966), examination of variation in fiddle tunes (Burman 1968), and works which focus on a particular song family or theme such as coal mining or railroad songs (Green 1972; Cohen 1981).

Cultural historian Charles Wolfe recognized the limitations of the type of approaches named above and which are song- or artist-oriented. Instead, he argued for a
broader, contextual approach to the study of old time country music, one which utilized phonograph records as folklore documents (1974). This approach is one that would consider the relationship between artists and the record companies; the conditions under which the recordings were made, in the field and in the studio; the effects that geographical factors may have had on the process of field recordings; and the impact of these records on the artists and their communities. While this contextual approach broadens considerably the scope of hillbilly music research, I would argue that it still does not go far enough simply because of its singular emphasis on recorded material. One cannot dispute the usefulness of the phonograph recording as a historical document itself and a source of material for study. However, its significance has been overemphasized and a somewhat distorted picture of its impact has emerged. Bill Malone would seem to agree. He writes

> Important though they might be, records at best provide a one-dimensional view of commercial folk tradition. They tell us nothing about the thousands of performers who never entered a recording chamber, and little about the commercial aspects of folk music before the inauguration of the phonograph industry. Since the birth of the country music industry in the twenties, most performers have centered their
activities around the often-allied fields of radio and personal appearances (1971).

Malone makes some significant points here which the careers of the performers from southcentral Kentucky, to be discussed in the following chapters, will further, and vividly illustrate. Of primary importance then is the fact that, although phonograph records are often believed to be the most important factor in the expansion and dissemination of country music, recordings actually played a lesser role than either that of radio or personal appearances. An article that appeared in *Billboard* in the 1950s discussing the Weaver Brothers and Elviry (an Ozark hillbilly group whose career began before the advent of radio and continued through the 1930s without benefit of records) maintained that it was the medium of radio that "should be tendered the major credit for boosting the folk, country and western field to its present important niche in the show business and music fields" (Sachs 1955). Malone agrees that radio was particularly important in the expansion of country music. He further notes that while some have said that personal appearances were the most important medium used by early country performers to reach their audience, these appearances were most often made within the listening range of a radio station from which the artists broadcast. It was through these live radio broadcasts that performers would
then publicize their upcoming appearances in the area (Malone 1971).

In this light, it seems as though recordings may not, in fact, have been viewed by some artists themselves as a very consequential component of their careers, certainly not the most important aspect. A prime example is the Monroe Brothers, who had by the mid-1930s developed quite a reputation as performers due to their personal appearances and radio work in the Midwest and the South. When they were first approached by a Victor Records representative Eli Oberstein to record for the Victor subsidiary label, Bluebird, they ignored his offer, apparently not much impressed with Oberstein's offer or the idea of making records. It was only after much persistence on the part of Oberstein that the Monroe Brothers made their first recordings on February 17, 1936 (Spielman 1979:256; Rosenberg 1985:33).

The Monroe Brothers, however, are only one example. What of the Blankenship Family of North Carolina who, after making one record for Columbia and being asked to make more, simply "didn't bother to go back" (Coltman 1978)? Were there others who received similar offers and simply chose to ignore them? What of the legions of musicians who, for lack of opportunity or possibly a want of motivation or desire, never made any commercial recordings? It becomes apparent that to continue to focus primarily on well-known performers
and recording artists is to disregard many vital historical
details which, in turn, help to create a less than complete
picture of country music. Folklorist W.K. McNeil is one who
argues for more research emphasis on the careers of lesser
known artists. He states that

"... in some respects the lesser lights are more
important for the simple reason that their careers are
more typical of what country music was like for most of
its practitioners. Moreover, while the "unknowns"
ever achieved the fame that was acquired by their
better known colleagues, their music pleased numerous
fans over a long period of country music's history"
(McNeil 1993).

And they did so primarily by means of live performances
transmitted via radio and by personal appearances advertised
while on the radio.

It is recognized that radio was a particularly
important element in the expansion of country music.
Hillbilly music, too, played an important early role in the
popularization of a new form of media called radio. Because
the development of radio and country music are so closely
intertwined, some discussion of this relationship is in
order at this point.
According to William Randle's *History of Radio Broadcasting and Its Social and Economic Effect on the Entertainment Industry 1920-1930*, the earliest reported transmission of music via some sort of electronic media occurred around 1877. The music was classical not hillbilly; the particular media in use here was not radio, but happened to be telephone lines (Randle 1966:3). Not surprisingly, the earliest broadcasts of hillbilly music took place in a similar fashion. In one account, an Ozark fiddler named Uncle Jim Haley and his sons were playing old time dance tunes for their neighbors over telephone party lines as early as 1910 in Pulaski County, Missouri (Wixson 1979). It was about this same time that the first regular radio broadcasts were beginning to take place. Among the earliest broadcast programs were segments of live music.

After World War I, there was a rapid and dramatic proliferation of new radio stations across the country. These stations often broadcast from early morning to late in the evening and had many time slots to fill each day for which performers were needed. Early on, radio stations did not pay performers for their appearances. For this reason, many established singers and instrumentalists were reluctant to make radio appearances. While the big-name artists were to difficult to obtain, there were more than enough local amateurs and professionals available who were to become the mainstay of early radio programming.
This seemingly unlimited resource, the large pool of local performers, was probably the most important factor in a station owners' decision to use live broadcasts to fill open radio time (Randle 1966:95). The wide range of artists willing to perform on radio determined both the style and content of early broadcasts which, by all accounts, was truly diverse (Lichty 1964:114-17; Wolfe 1977:55; Lornell 1987; Daniel 1990:47-51). At WSB in Atlanta, the first radio station on the air in the South, and believed to be the first to broadcast hillbilly music, the daily schedule included light classical music and black quartets alongside fiddlers and banjo players, often on the same program. Serendipity played a large role in determining the type of musical programming featured on a given program. According to a former station manager at WSB, the programs would feature just about anybody who could "sing, whistle, play a musical instrument, or even breathe heavily" (Wiggins 1987:69). Despite the great diversity of musical programming heard on early radio, country music emerged as an leading favorite. It was especially so among the many listeners for whom the music was part of everyday life or even just a reminder to city folks of the way life used to be. It may have had an appeal to the managers of radio stations for technical reasons: it seems many of them felt that somehow the music of stringed instruments broadcast over the airwaves in a manner superior to other musical
instruments (Daniel 1990:50). Though radio stations would become more "sophisticated" and would sharpen their focus with time, live musical broadcasts continued to be a prominent program format for the next three decades, and continue to some extent today. Throughout, country music would continue to play a major role.

Radio's impact on American music and culture in general, especially in the South, has been the subject of much debate by scholars for several decades. It has been asserted repeatedly that the advent of radio has had a leveling effect on American culture, nationalizing it and introducing a trend toward standardization and mediocrity. One historian has stated that radio has "diffused urban attitudes and tastes among isolated farms and villages and thus broke down regionalism. Distinctive dialects, diction, and pronunciation were modified in favor of a standard form" (Wish 1952:454). Fred Hoeptner, decrying what he views as the destructive commercialism brought on by the mass media, argues that the machinations of radio had disturbed the process by which vocal and instrumental folk music had been transmitted for ages--that is, by word of mouth and by imitation from person to person (1966).

Others, however, dispute these arguments, noting that cultural change as exemplified by the analogous development of radio and country music is part of a natural, ongoing process. Randle claims that "while societies are normally
conservative and the mass of traditions tend to persist, there is always change in culture, and any discussion of specific styles of performance and types of successful entertainment is only valid for the pinpoint in time discussed" (1966:417). Wilgus noted that radio simply provided "a new media for an already existing tradition" that "helped to change the existing pattern, slowly" (1965). Bill Malone hits close to the mark with his supposition that mass media has not caused the debasement of our society and culture, let alone country music, but is merely the by-product of a much greater trend of cultural commodification. He states that rural music's commercialization "has been a continuing and accelerating process paralleling the commercialization of American life, and radio and recording served not as aberrations but merely new phases" (1971).

These "new phases" left their mark on country music forever. One direct result was the development of a high degree of professionalism which created competition for audiences among performers. Another result was a broadening of the country music repertoire to include material from non-traditional as well as traditional sources and the identification of popular performers with a distinctive "sound" that by the 1940s (when the radio performers that are the focus of this study began broadcasting) had become
significantly different from the fiddle-dominated hillbilly music of the 1920s (Spielman 1979:251-255).

In order to add to their own repertoires and enhance their listener appeal, many local radio performers incorporated into their broadcast performances material made popular by "big-name" artists, thus leading to the prevalence of some material that was assumed to be favored by the listening audience. That these changes are thought by some to represent a disintegration of a music tradition and traditional values may be only partially true. It is a fact that by the World War II period, country music exhibited much less of what has typically been considered "folk" content. The songs were generally no longer products of an age-old oral tradition, but were for the most part newly composed and learned via the mass media.

Let us, for a moment, ignore the music's content and look instead at its performers and audiences and the circumstances under which it was played. It will be noted that, in many ways, little had changed over the years and that it remained comfortably within most accepted boundaries of folk music, which, according to one definition, "reflects the informally shared experience of a folk group closely linked by occupation, neighborhood, social class, ethnic heritage, religious affiliation, dialect, race," or some other similar characteristic (Titon 1992:168). It has been argued that the commercialization of country music and the
resulting changes have actually been beneficial and, in certain respects, have shored up southern folk culture. Randle asserts that the "constant process of subtle change, reinterpretation, emphasis, and revival is a major reason for the emergence of a revitalized, dynamic culture pattern in white Southern popular music as a result of radio broadcasts and phonograph records by hillbilly artists" (1966:417).

The local rural radio stations that broadcast live country music have done their part, serving more than just mercantile purposes. While most rural radio stations were started for the purpose of advertising and selling goods and services to their listening audiences, they generally became deeply integrated into the social and economic make-up of the communities they served. In addition to providing essential services such as news, weather, and market reports, rural radio stations also functioned as a hub of community life and activity, while serving up a listener-directed, participatory type of entertainment that is best personified by old time country music (Hagerty 1975). From the earliest days of broadcasting, local country radio programs primarily featured performers who were members of the communities served by these stations and thus further reinforced social and cultural ties.

This practice was once a common one in rural areas and small towns across the United States. Southcentral Kentucky
was no exception. The following chapters will focus on those dedicated and talented performers who broadcast their various brands of country music over the local airwaves in the 1940s and 50s on stations WLBJ and WKCT in Bowling Green and WKAY in Glasgow.
CHAPTER TWO

RADIO STATIONS WLBJ AND WKCT:
THE EMERGENCE OF LIVE COUNTRY MUSIC RADIO
IN BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY

The story of early country music in southcentral Kentucky appears to be rather unremarkable in many ways. The area was once rich in ballad singing and old time fiddle and banjo music, the traditions out of which country music evolved (Chamberlain 1940; Calhoun 1941). Though there was an abundance of good musicians around, very few of them ever pursued music as a full-time occupation. Even fewer of them ever achieved any sort of national recognition. There were the obvious exceptions of course. Floyd "Salty" Holmes, Charles "Chick" Hurt, and Jack Taylor of the Prairie Ramblers, Cynthia May Carver, better known as Cousin Emmy, Finley "Red" Belcher, and Uncle Henry and His Kentucky Mountaineers are some that immediately come to mind. But in each of these cases, the first step to success was a move out of southcentral Kentucky. For the Prairie Ramblers it meant leaving Glasgow and Summer Shade and joining forces in northern Illinois before moving on to station WOC in Davenport, Iowa, and later WLS in Chicago. For Barren County’s Cousin Emmy the move was first to WHAS in
Louisville, then to WSB in Atlanta and finally to KMOX in St. Louis, where her performances landed her some much-deserved renown. Red Belcher left Monroe County and traveled to Tuscola, Illinois, and station WDZ where he landed the first of what were to be many successful jobs on the radio. Henry Warren put together the Kentucky Mountaineers while living in Rockford, Illinois, after having moved from Green County in the early 1930s.

For each band or individual who went on to bigger and better things, there were several who remained behind, playing hillbilly music as an avocation, maybe hoping to hit it big but never quite making it. It is those people who kept the flame alive. Following patterns established by their ancestors, these musicians entertained their friends and neighbors and folks from nearby towns and settlements by playing square dances, first at local house parties and later at dance halls; by putting on musical programs at school houses and theaters; and by broadcasting their music live from local radio stations. These tradition-based artists are the subjects of this study.

Though southcentral Kentucky’s first local radio station did not begin its broadcasts until 1940, the development of local country music did not wait for the arrival of radio. The vocal and instrumental traditions of the area out of which hillbilly music emerged shared much in common with those found throughout the Upland South, playing
an important role in the region's social life since the appearance of the first settlers there. The customary forms of entertainment popular in the early part of this century as described to me by nearly every one of my informants and in at least two earlier studies done on the music in the region (Chamberlain 1940; Calhoun 1941) seem remarkably similar to those popular amusements enjoyed by people in other parts of the South, as for example in Tennessee or West Virginia (Wolfe 1977:14-22; Tribe 1984:2-5). Singing and playing music to pass an evening with family or friends, fiddle contests, talent shows, and square dancing to music provided by local fiddlers, banjo pickers, and later, guitarists and other instrumentalists were once-common forms of diversion with which folks entertained themselves in the years before World War II. Some of the better and more determined musicians recognized that there was a demand for their abilities. Many organized themselves into regular working bands and began putting on shows at county fairs, in school houses, and at political rallies. It was out of this milieu that a pool of talented and ambitious musicians emerged, musicians who were to become the pioneers of country music radio in southcentral Kentucky.

That opportunity came in July, 1940, when radio station WLBJ began regular broadcasts from its studio located at Fairview and Lehman Avenues in Bowling Green. Before WLBJ went on the air, people listening to the radio had to choose
among stations from outside the area. There was WSM, which broadcast from Nashville, WHAS, which originated in Louisville, or if they could pick it up, WHOP in Hopkinsville. After sundown, there were several high power clear-channel stations that could be heard in the region, including WLS from Chicago and WSB in Atlanta.

The fledgling station was owned and operated by the Bowling Green Broadcasting Company, actually a consortium of local businessmen, L. B. Jenkins (hence the call letters WLBJ), Rayburn R. Rose, and J. P. Turner. The station broadcast from 6:00 A.M. to 10:30 P.M. Monday through Friday and 8:00 A.M. to 10:30 P.M. on Sunday. Although WLBJ's broadcast power was just 250 watts in the beginning, it is estimated that there were over 167,000 people with some 23,000 radio sets within its broadcast range (Alicoate 1941).

The station's programming was a mixed bag from the beginning and remained so, judging from daily schedules that were published off and on throughout the 1940s and 50s in the Bowling Green papers, The Times-Journal and The Park City Daily News. There was a variety of talk shows, including news and farm reports, sporting events, and a "Man On the Street" program in which interviews were actually conducted and broadcast live from the town square. Music programming, which made up over half of the total daily
schedule, was an assorted mix of shows featuring disc jockeys playing records and programs of live music.

In the beginning, the record-spinning shows chiefly highlighted popular artists like Bing Crosby and Gene Austin, various dance orchestras and light classics, although later on occasional recorded segments were given to country artists like Jimmy Wakely and the Sons of the Pioneers. The live shows also featured some popular and classical music, but hillbilly music was a prominent feature on WLBJ from the very beginning.

Joe Marshall, who with his group was eventually to host his own program on WLBJ, recalled that one of the first bands that played there over the air on a regular basis was Hazelip’s Old Timers. As might be presumed from the band’s name, they were an old time string band, specializing in fiddle breakdowns and other instrumental pieces. The Old Timers were probably a bit of an anomaly in an era when country music was drifting away from the older string band sounds and undergoing some dramatic stylistic changes, but they were nonetheless quite popular. Fronted by Fount "Pappy" Hazelip, a drop-thumb style banjo player, the band included another banjo player remembered by Marshall only as Hendricks, a tenor banjo player named Joe Russ, Ruby Daniels on piano, a fiddler named Sam Moore, and one or two more whose names have been forgotten. As Marshall recollects,
the Old Timers had already established a reputation by the
time they began their broadcasts on WLBJ:

. . . They played on the radio before. They went down
in Springfield, Tennessee and played on WSIX. WSIX,
course, moved to Nashville. And they went there and
played on radio some. And, boy, they were, that made
'em big stars. They was radio stars. They were
good . . . and they had about six or seven pieces, and
boy, they could dish it out. They played the Grand Ole
Opry music in those days, which was mostly hoedown
music and rhythm. And they did it. And they were good
and they played . . . schools and all around. And pie
suppers, ice cream suppers, and charged admission. And
they all had daily jobs, too.

Hazelip's Old Timers continued their regular broadcasts on
WLBJ at one o'clock every Sunday afternoon for about two
years and then disbanded in 1943. Pappy Hazelip was to
reemerge with a newly organized group on a new Bowling Green
radio station, WKCT, soon after the end of the war.

As was the case from the earliest days of live
radio broadcasting, serendipity played a sizable role in
determining who and what was to be heard on the air.
One of the station's earliest advertisers was Kirtley's
Furniture Store. Kirtley's sponsored a live program,
featuring local country performers, that was broadcast each Sunday afternoon from the Diamond Theater on College Street on the square in Bowling Green. Auditions for that show in the form of a talent contest were held every Thursday evening at the furniture store located down the street from the theater just north of the square.

The winners of one of these talent contests in 1941 were two groups led by young men still in high school, the Blanton Brothers, Odis and John, and Joe Marshall and the Rovin' Ramblers. Joe Marshall recalls that day:

Odis Blanton and I auditioned for the radio station the same night at Kirtley's Furniture Store down on College Street and that store's still there. It's more of a modern building now. But we auditioned down there in that store, and he sponsored some radio stuff. And we played down in that furniture store to audition for radio. And Odis's group, he and his brother, the Blanton Brothers at that time . . . John was his brother, played a steel guitar. And Odis played rhythm guitar and they sang together, duets. And we auditioned the same day. Same time. And we both made it. Now at that time we was auditioning for a live show at the old Diamond Theater.
Though Odis Blanton and Joe Marshall were just teenagers at the time, they soon gained reputations as being among the most dedicated and popular country music performers and promoters in the Bowling Green area. Although they had already achieved a reputation for themselves through their musical abilities, their success in the talent show and playing on the radio served to boost the popularity of both groups.

Soon after their success on the talent show earned them an appearance on the Sunday afternoon show, the Blanton Brothers were given their own fifteen-minute show from 8:00 to 8:15 on Saturday mornings. For Odis this was the beginning of an association with WLBJ that was to last for some thirty years--first as a musician and then as DJ and radio personality.

By the time Odis and his brother John began their Saturday morning show, they had been playing together for several years. Odis was born in 1925 and lived his early life near Brownsville, in Edmonson County. Other than his father, who played guitar a little, the Blanton family was not particularly a musical one. They were music lovers, though, and listened regularly to radio broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry. Odis heard country music from the time he was a small child, and when he was twelve or thirteen he became interested in learning to play:
I guess back when I was a real youngster, my family loved country music. Course everybody would listen to the Grand Ole Opry. That’s back in 1925 or whatever you know . . . As I grew up, we had old battery radios and everything. And maybe we’re the only people in the community that had a radio even. And families around would come in and we’d listen to the Grand Ole Opry and we’d listen to boxing matches, whatever. And I got to liking music. My brother . . . John Blanton played an old guitar. And he would aggravate me to death because I didn’t. I wasn’t very interested. But then I got to be interested. My dad knew a few chords. He showed us that. So I started learning to play guitar. He (John) and I started together. I got to playing the guitar and he got to playing the steel guitar, dobro, or whatever you call it.

I never did take any lessons or anything. I’d just pick ‘em up from people. I guess the first guitar I ever owned was about a five-dollar guitar from picking strawberries on the farm. And we went from that. I kept wanting to play. I’d go to . . . where people were playing, at schools and watch new chords that guitar players would make. And I’d memorize ‘em, go home, and I didn’t care if it was ten or eleven at
night, kept the family up. I’d work until I got ‘em down.

One of the groups Odis scrutinized was a local band called the Green River Greenhorns. Members of that outfit were Guy Johnson, Cap Lindsay, and Cowboy Jack. They had a radio show on WHOP in Hopkinsville and played locally around Brownsville. Sometimes Odis would walk nearly ten miles to hear them play. He paid particularly close attention to the guitar player. His perseverance paid off, for soon he and his brother were playing shows at school houses throughout the area, charging ten to twenty-five cents admission. Through their radio shows and their personal appearances, the Blanton Brothers became in-demand performers, all while Odis was still in high school. Their success brought with it a certain degree of notoriety and support among their friends and neighbors for their musical ambitions. Odis remembers an incident that illustrates this well:

We would book little country schools and play them and charge ten cents or a quarter for people to get in, things like this. I can recall on my graduation from high school, I had a show set up and it’s the wrong time for graduation. And the principal got up and made the announcement that due that I had a show booked, he’s gonna have to postpone the date of the
I mean I never will forget that. He called me the Gene Autry of Brownsville, Kentucky.

The Blanton Brothers continued to play personal appearances and their Saturday show on WLBJ. Their repertoire was diverse and included a mix of old time material and popular country songs of the day. On their shows Odis and John played songs by artists like Roy Acuff, the Delmore Brothers, and Red Foley, as well as older, traditional folk songs.

Though the Blantons had earned their spot on the radio by winning a contest, in order to maintain that spot, they had to demonstrate that their show had a listening audience. Each show had a sponsor who paid for advertising on that time spot--Ozark Tonic was the Blanton Brother’s main sponsor in the early days. The sponsors, in turn, wanted to be sure their advertisements were heard. One means by which the station and sponsors could determine a show’s popularity was by the amount of mail it drew. To encourage mail while on the air, Odis and John would ask their listeners to write in with requests. This approach apparently worked quite well. Odis remembers that they received so much mail that the mailman brought it to them tied up in bundles.

After four or five years of playing on the air, Odis was approached by the station management and was offered a job spinning records. He accepted, and shortly afterward,
went to Port Arthur, Texas to get his radio engineering license. Upon his return, Odis went back to WLBJ, playing music and working as a disk jockey and announcer.

After several years of playing as a duo, Odis and John put together a band, named it the Blue Star Rangers, and began playing western swing. This type of music was sweeping the nation during the 1940s, primarily through the popularity of one of its pioneering stylists, Bob Wills. While in Texas, Odis had become enamored with western swing and was determined to play it himself once back in Kentucky. To play this style of music necessitated the organization of a larger band. The personnel and instrumentation of the Rangers would vary some over the years but generally included lead guitar, one or two fiddles, drums, piano and sometimes accordion. Gene Kitchens was a fiddler who played in an early configuration of the group. Gwen Dalton held down the piano chair for several years, and Wondell Dye played accordion.

Around 1947, Odis and the Blue Star Rangers began hosting a fifteen minute show which soon expanded to a full hour. Called the Farm and Home Hour, the show featured musical performances by the Rangers and assorted local musicians who appeared as guests. Billy Vaughn, a Bowling Green native who became a successful popular recording artist in the 1950s, played piano on the show now and then. A husband and wife duo with whom the Blanton Brothers had
played on their first radio show, Russ and Jo Fisher, were also frequent guests on the Farm and Home Hour. The Fishers' close harmony singing and subtle guitar playing was heard for years on radio in Bowling Green. They switched to WLBJ's rival station WKCT in the late forties and were hired in the early 1950s by The Renfro Valley Barn Dance where they received widespread acclaim.

Soon after they were organized, the Blue Star Rangers began to make regular appearances throughout the area surrounding Bowling Green. They were featured many times as the opening act for big name country acts that were booked into the Bowling Green Armory before it burned in late 1947. They shared the bill with other local groups at Bowling Green night spots like the Quonset and the Boots and Saddle Club, places that featured live music and dancing on the weekends. In the early fifties, the Rangers occasionally found themselves hired as backup musicians for well known acts from Nashville. Some of the artists they played behind were Webb Pierce, Bill Carlisle, Faron Young, and Red Sovine. The band was recruited to work as session players by a small record company, Tennessee Records, when it came to Bowling Green to record material by some up-and-coming local singers and instrumentalists, among them piano player Del Wood. Odis and the Rangers made one record under their own name for the Dixieana label, a small company that
operated in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. They also backed Gwen Dalton on her recordings on Dixieana.

The band's longest-standing job started around 1950 when they began playing for dances held at Beech Bend Park. Beech Bend Park was an amusement park with a dance pavilion located on the edge of town on the Barren River. Odis Blanton and the Blue Star Rangers played for the Saturday night dances held at the park for the next sixteen years. During the mid-fifties, daily live country music programming on the radio slowly ground to a halt in southcentral Kentucky, much as it did elsewhere, due to pressure on stations from record companies to push their products and station management's concerns about program quality and continuity (Hagerty 1975; Lornell 1987). Despite this, Odis continued his work as a radio personality on WLBJ until 1973. The Blue Star Rangers were to carry on, doing personal appearances and playing for several years on a local TV station, WLTV, before disbanding in 1977. Odis now owns an insurance agency in Bowling Green which, he says, keeps him plenty busy.

Joe Marshall and his group, the Rovin' Ramblers, began their long and distinguished career as local radio performers on a Sunday afternoon in 1942. On that day, they appeared, along with the Blanton Brothers, on a program broadcast from the Diamond Theater that was sponsored by Kirtley's Furniture Store. Like the Blantons, the Rovin'
Ramblers were youngsters, still in high school when they began working on WLBJ. Joe was a Warren County native, born and raised on a dairy farm. He had an uncle, Vernon Marshall, who occasionally played the fiddle. Joe recollects that his uncle’s playing impressed him, despite the fact he was an unpolished, self-taught musician:

He didn’t know music, but he’d just sit down in a chair and put his fiddle down on his chest and played away. And he didn’t know a lot of tunes. What he played was real good.

Joe studied classical violin for a couple of years and even played in the school orchestra for a time, but stuck with fiddling because "that’s where my heart was, where my interest was, the fiddle." Joe’s early musical influences were three of the best, and best-known, fiddlers of the day:

Howdy Forester was a fiddler that fiddled with Bill Monroe first at the Grand Ole Opry and then he played for Roy Acuff for twenty-five years . . . and he was my favorite fiddle player, I guess, of anybody. And Curley Fox. I’d say maybe Curly Fox was really my favorite fiddle player. And he was going strong when I started learning fiddle. He was a little older than Howdy Forrester. And Curly Fox was a champion fiddler
all over the country. Course I heard Curly quite a bit because he was on the Grand Ole Opry. And then Clayton McMichen had a program on WHAS in Louisville. And we listened to him . . . I guess they were the guys that influenced me more than anybody on fiddle. Especially Curly Fox.

Another of Joe’s influences was Roy Acuff. From the beginning, the Rovin’ Ramblers always included some of Acuff’s material in their repertoire and in general adopted a performance style and sound that was somewhat similar to Acuff’s band, the Smokey Mountain Boys. Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys were also favorites of the Rovin’ Ramblers. The Ramblers played some of Monroe’s material, though they never considered themselves a "bluegrass" band. The instrumentation of the Rovin’ Ramblers remained fairly constant over the years, generally consisting of fiddle, mandolin, one or two guitars, and string bass. This combination was to vary some. For a short time around 1950, the band began to include some popular dance music in their repertoire and added some members who could play horns as well as the more common stringed instruments.

Though the instrumentation and sound of the band stayed fairly consistent, there were several personnel changes throughout the band’s history. When the band went on the air at WLBJ, its members were Tilford Kinser and Bill
Markham on guitar, Curley Thomas on string bass, Joe on fiddle, and Joe’s brother, Kenny Marshall, on mandolin. Within a couple of years, Markham and Thomas had left and were replaced first by Floyd Dunn, then Howard Daniels on bass and Jimmie Poston on electric guitar. The addition of Poston made the Ramblers the first group in the area to utilize an electric guitar. Poston’s stay, however, was a short one. Floyd Dunn was to return and hold down the bass chores for several years. Several other musicians played off and on with the Rovin’ Ramblers. Gene Kitchens, a noted fiddler who had also played in Odis Blanton’s group, and his brother Chuck, a guitarist, played with the Rovin’ Ramblers throughout most of the late forties and early fifties.

Because of their popularity, the group was given their own fifteen-minute program that aired Monday through Friday at noon. This show was very successful, and soon WLBJ’s program director, Ken Givens, had the Ramblers hosting a Saturday afternoon show, the Hayloft Jamboree. The show ran about an hour and a half and featured guest appearances by local singers and musicians. Ken Givens had recently moved to Bowling Green from Wheeling, West Virginia, to work at WLBJ. A fan of hillbilly music, and familiar with the Wheeling Jamboree on station WWVA in Wheeling, Givens was also a promoter eager to increase the visibility of WLBJ through the use of country-music programming. That he was quite impressed with the Rovin’ Ramblers’ talents as
performers was evident in a letter he wrote to The Mountain Broadcast and Prairie Recorder, an early fan magazine. It read, in part:

I'd like to chip in with a few words about a favorite radio show hereabouts, Joe Marshall and His Rovin' Ramblers, one of the finest string bands to be found in South Kentucky. Joe and his boys have been handing out this good brand of entertainment for about six years, and are now being presented over WLBJ, here in Bowling Green, besides making many personal appearances . . . .

Their ability as musicians and entertainers is borne out by the fact that they have appeared several times on bills with both the Grand Ole Opry and the Renfro Valley Folks.

. . . there is no doubt that Joe Marshall and His Rovin' Ramblers will be shooting for the top of the ladder, and with excellent chances of getting there (Givens 1946).

As the letter indicates, the Rovin' Ramblers kept busy when not on the air, making regular personal appearances. At times they got bookings as the opening act on a bill featuring performers from the Opry or Renfro Valley. For a time the group had a regular job playing a square dance
every Saturday night at the Bowling Green Armory, located at 10th and Chestnut Streets. When the Armory burned down, the band rented the armory in Russellville and played for square dances there on Saturday nights. According to Joe, the move proved profitable, as people from as far away as Bowling Green would make the drive to Russellville every Saturday night for the dance.

Meanwhile Joe and his group continued to work regularly at what was probably the most commonly played venue by country musicians of that era, the schoolhouse. Playing schoolhouse programs provided the Rovin' Ramblers a regular creative outlet where they could try out new material and refine their musical and comedy routines. It took a certain amount of scrambling to keep the band in bookings. This activity was Joe's domain, and it was here that he probably began to hone his skills as a promoter. Joe remembers that because of the popularity of the Ramblers' radio shows, booking the band in schools became fairly easy:

I'd get in the car and head out during the day and knock on the door. "Who's the principal here?" And say, "I'm Joe Marshall from Bowling Green."

"Oh! You are! I hear you on the radio."

I say, "Yes, that's why I'm here. We'd like to come up to your school and bring our program sometime."
"Be glad to have you."

Easy to book. 'Cause see, they'd hear us on the radio. We were radio stars. And we'd give 'em twenty-five percent, sometimes thirty. And in the meantime they could have an ice cream supper, a pie supper with to raise money. But long as we got our seventy-five percent of that door receipt, that's all we'd ask.

Playing at schools and for the square dances in Russellville proved to Joe and his band that they had drawing power. During the summer of 1947 they decided to try out a new idea back in Bowling Green. They pitched a tent in a lot on the corner of Eighth and Kentucky Streets, put down a wooden floor that could be carried out in sections, and played dances there all that summer and fall until November. The success of these dances convinced Joe, his brother Kenny, and friend Floyd Dunn that they should operate their own dance hall. That autumn they set to work on a building, and by the end of November the Quonset was completed and open for business.

During this same time period, something else occurred that proved fortuitous for the Rovin' Ramblers. A new radio station began operation in Bowling Green. WKCT, owned and operated by a local newspaper, The Daily News, began broadcasting from its studios located in a building on the square in downtown Bowling Green. It was a much more
powerful station than the 250 watt station WLBJ, broadcasting at 1000 watts (Alicoate 1948). Joe Marshall immediately saw the benefits to be derived from having a greater broadcast range and soon landed a job for himself and his band on the new station. Paul Huddleston, the station manager, put Joe in charge of selecting talent that was to appear on the air. Between his activities at the Quonset, the radio station and with his band, Joe kept busy.

Though country acts had been appearing for years at the armory and at local theaters, the Quonset was the first place in town that featured music and dancing on a regular basis. The Rovin’ Ramblers played there nearly every Saturday night, often opening for out-of-town groups like Clayton McMichen’s Georgia Wildcats, Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, or Pee Wee King’s Golden West Cowboys. Sometimes they would split the bill with Odis Blanton and the Blue Star Rangers on Friday nights. The Quonset remained a popular night spot in Bowling Green through the mid-fifties.

Meanwhile, WKCT was proving to be a most receptive place for local country bands and singers. Joe Marshall and the Rovin’ Ramblers played several shows a week. For a time they hosted the Saturday afternoon Farm Journal Program. They also played a fifteen-minute program at 7:15 in the morning that aired up to six times a week. Russ and Jo Fisher were among the frequent guests on the Farm Journal
Program. They also had their own fifteen-minute shows during the week on an intermittent basis until they went to the Renfro Valley Barn Dance in the mid-fifties. Saturday seemed to be the big day for live programs in Bowling Green. In October of 1948, Saturdays witnessed four programs of live country music that began early in the morning and ran intermittently until the early afternoon. Bill Blake and the Rangers started the day off with a fifteen-minute show at 6:30. The Rovin' Ramblers followed with a fifteen-minute segment at 7:15. Beginning a few hours later, a newly-organized version of Pappy Hazelip and the Old Timers had a half-hour show from 11:30 to noon. Finally, at 1:00 in the afternoon, Cliff Gross and the Cowboys played a half-hour show.

Cliff Gross was one of the greatest fiddlers to emerge from southcentral Kentucky. Though he left the area in 1931 and is generally remembered for his musical achievements elsewhere, some discussion of his career is pertinent here. Cliff was born in Butler County, between Bowling Green and Morgantown, in 1898, and apparently learned to play the fiddle as a youngster. He moved to Texas in 1931 to join some relatives who were playing with a group called The Hi-Flyers (Wolfe 1982:89-90). The Hi-Flyers were one of the pioneer bands in a newly emerging sub-genre of hillbilly music called western swing. He soon joined The Light Crust Doughboys, replacing an up-and-coming fiddler who had just
left to form his own band. That fiddler was Bob Wills. Cliff continued to live in Texas throughout much of the 1930s, playing music and even appearing in two movies, "Oh Susanna" and "The Big Show." By 1938 he had organized his own band, The Universal Cowboys, with whom he made several recordings. Cliff also recorded several old time fiddle numbers with only guitar accompaniment for the American Record Corporation around the same time (Jolesch 1938). These records were issued under names of "Clifford Gross and Muryel Campbell" or "Cliff and Ray."

In 1939 Cliff moved to Louisville, where he soon organized a band called the Texas Cowboys. For nearly ten years Cliff was based in Louisville where he and the Texas Cowboys played in local theaters and dance halls and over the radio on station WINN and later on WAVE. In 1948 Cliff moved to Bowling Green where he organized a band that played for dances and on the radio there. He had his own show on WKCT for nearly three years beginning in 1948. He often was a featured guest on radio shows hosted by Odis Blanton on WLBJ and Joe Marshall on WKCT. Marshall recalls that Cliff occasionally would sit in with the Rovin' Ramblers on the radio and at personal appearances. Cliff continued to play around Bowling Green on an infrequent basis until his death in 1956.

Like the competition across town, WKCT slowly phased out programs that featured live music. Times were changing.
It was a lot less trouble and less expense to have one person spinning records than to maintain a sizable roster of performers. By 1956, live country music on the radio had become a thing of the past in Bowling Green.

The Rovin’ Ramblers continued to play once in a while and, like Odis Blanton’s group, they found themselves on the local television station WLTV for a few years beginning in the early 1960s. Though no longer active on a regular basis, the group has never actually disbanded and reassembles itself for special occasions, such as WLBJ’s fiftieth anniversary celebration, or a recent tribute to the late Roy Acuff on the local cable TV channel.

In 1940, when WLBJ went on the air, Bowling Green gained the distinction of being the first town in southcentral Kentucky to have a radio station. As such, it became a mecca of sorts for local musicians trying to get their music heard over the radio. Many of these musicians came from the area directly surrounding Bowling Green. A few, though, drifted in from towns that were an hour or more from Bowling Green. Most of these aspiring performers’ tenure at WLBJ was brief to say the least, and most have been forgotten. Among those who made the trek to Bowling Green from outside the immediate area to be heard on the radio was a band led by an old time fiddler named Pat Kingery, and a singer and guitarist named Troy Basil, who became known as The Blind Troubadour a short time later.
Both Kingery and Basil were from Glasgow, a town located less than an hour away in neighboring Barren County. Though their efforts on radio in Bowling Green were not particularly fruitful, a change in their luck was just around the corner.
CHAPTER THREE
WKAY: LIVE COUNTRY MUSIC RADIO IN GLASGOW

A second radio station in southcentral Kentucky began operation in 1946, this time in Glasgow. When this station, WKAY, went on the air, it broadcast from six in the morning to eleven at night Monday through Saturday, seven A.M. to eleven in the evening on Sundays (Alicoate 1947). From the beginning, WKAY featured programs of live music alongside shows of recorded music. All one had to do in order to get one’s own show, in most instances, was to secure a sponsor. Not unlike the situation at WLBJ in Bowling Green, many aspiring stars flocked to WKAY in hopes of launching a musical career from their appearance there on the radio. Most of those who tried their luck as country music singers and pickers on the radio have long since been forgotten. Others were more successful, and though they might not have reaped great financial rewards from their musical activities, they often achieved a good deal of acclaim and local notoriety. However, one of these individuals, Noble Carver, better known as Uncle Bozo, was to realize near legendary status by the end of his multifaceted career as a performer and promoter of old time country music. Without exception, every individual interviewed in connection with
this project knew Uncle Bozo or had a story to tell about him.

Uncle Bozo Carver was the emcee of his own show on WKAY from the station’s earliest days on the air. The show was broadcast live every Saturday afternoon and featured regular appearances by The Walker Family, Troy Basil, The Calvert Sisters and occasional special guests. Although Carver had been a musician all of his life, he was also known as a comedian, dancer, and promoter of talent shows, fiddle contests, and square dances. It was his ability to put together shows and draw crowds for which he is best known. Ray Cain, a guitarist and banjo player from Tompkinsville who sometimes played in these shows, recalled Uncle Bozo’s talent for promoting his programs. Carver had an old touring car with two loud speakers on the top. According to Ray

He’d head down the road. And you know, tellin’ ‘em that he was gonna be in Moss, Tennessee, on Saturday night, or Red Boiling Springs, or Tompkinsville at the fairgrounds . . . I told different ones. I said, "He could take a banty rooster and a groundhog." And I said, "He could draw the awfulest crowd that has ever been to a fair or a gathering like that."
Noble (Uncle Bozo) Carver was born in rural Barren County on December 2, 1896. The Carver family was already well-known in the area for several generations of outstanding musicians. His father was an accomplished banjo player and several of his uncles played together in a popular string band for many years around the turn of the century. One of these uncles, Henry Carver, was a fiddler possessed of great prowess who is still remembered today for his skills. Henry was the father of Cynthia May Carver, who became the most famous member of the clan. She was better known as "Cousin Emmy" to legions of fans who heard her on the radio and saw her in person. (Lawson 1965:3-5).

Noble, who learned to play guitar as a young boy, had an older brother named Warner. Warner was the most accomplished musician in the family, playing the fiddle, banjo, harmonica, and guitar. As teenagers, the Carver Boys decided to become professional entertainers after going to the fair in Tompkinsville on a whim and making over sixty dollars in one weekend, playing music and passing the hat. Noble was soon booking the group, which at times included his cousin Robert Carver, in towns throughout southcentral Kentucky and over the state line in Tennessee. He also spent some time with Dr. Kelso's Medicine Show, based out of Indianapolis beginning in 1922, gaining experience that he was to put to good use when he began organizing his own shows in the decade following.
In July of 1929, the Carver Boys were approached by representatives from the Paramount Recording Company to make some records for their firm. In August of that year, the Carvers cut ten sides for Paramount, giving them the distinction of being among the few hillbilly performers from southcentral Kentucky ever to make records (Lawson 1965:8). They were among the first to do so as well. Richard Burnett and Leonard Rutherford from Monticello, to the east in Wayne County, began recording for Columbia Records in 1926, making them the first recording artists in the region (Wolfe 1973). Henry L. Bandy, a fiddler from Petroleum, in Allen County, had recorded several sides for the Gennett label in 1928, but these were never issued (Meade 1980).

Around 1930, Noble and Warner left Kentucky to embark on a radio career that, though lasting only a short time, would take them to several different cities, including Tuscola and Chicago in Illinois, Council Bluffs, Iowa, Omaha, Nebraska, and St. Joseph and Kansas City, Missouri, playing for shows sponsored by the Georgie Porgie Breakfast Food Company. By 1932, Warner had quit the music business and returned home to Kentucky. Noble went to Nashville where he spent two years working with touring shows from the Grand Ole Opry.

It was in 1935, while working with Cousin Emmy and Her Kinfolks that Noble Carver became known as "Uncle Bozo." The year before he had been given the moniker "Bozo," while
doing a comedy routine in a show put on by C.L. Scott in Glasgow. When Bozo began performing as part of her troupe, Cousin Emmy dubbed him "Uncle Bozo" thereby officially making him one of the "kinfolks." It was a name that stuck with him for the rest of his life (Harbison 1970).

Uncle Bozo is probably best remembered in southcentral Kentucky for the numerous programs he booked, promoted, and emceed over several decades. He was an entertainer of the "old school." His shows combined elements left over from the minstrel show era with bits of vaudeville and the medicine show, and generally contained segments of old time music, comedy routines, and dancing. He, himself, often did a little of each, but concentrated mainly on comedy and dancing. Ray Cain remembers that Uncle Bozo especially loved to dance. During his shows, Ray recalls, "If he could get someone else to play for him, he wanted to dance. I tell ya, he'd rather dance than eat when he's hungry."

Uncle Bozo had no problem getting someone to play for him. In fact, his shows would feature the best local musicians available, often the winners of talent shows he had sponsored.

One such group of musicians worked off and on with Uncle Bozo for several years beginning the late 1930s. Known simply as the Combs Family Band, they were led by Josh Combs, an outstanding drop-thumb banjo player. The Combs Family played for years in Monroe County at pie suppers,
picnics, and contests. Other band members were Josh’s wife, Ada, who played the pump organ, their son, Floyd, alternating on fiddle and guitar, a daughter, Iris Ellen, who played guitar, banjo, and some fiddle and sang duets with her sister, Zelma, who played mandolin. According to Iris Ellen (Combs) Bartley, the family played "mostly country music." Around 1940, the group made some home recordings with assistance from Uncle Bozo. Included among the pieces they recorded were several fiddle tunes, local favorites like "Railroad Through the Rocky Mountains" and "Coleman’s March," as well as a number of more commonly played tunes such as "Arkansas Traveler," "Marching Through Georgia," and "Soldier’s Joy." Zelma and Iris sang duets accompanied only by their mandolin and guitar, songs such as "St. Louis Blues" and "Where the Soul Never Dies." Though their solid musicianship and work with Uncle Bozo had the potential to impart to the band a high degree of acclaim and visibility, the family kept most, but not all, of their musical activities on a level that was informal and centered within the community.

The Combs Family Band’s crowning achievement took place in London, Kentucky, in the mid-1930s. The group had entered and won a local contest in Gamaliel, just south of Tompkinsville, sponsored by a local feed company. Similar contests were held all over the state. The winners of each local contest were to go to London, Kentucky, and play in a
state-wide competition. Taking first prize in the string band contest was the Combs Family. Playing with them that day was a friend and fiddler from Rockbridge, in north central Monroe County, Jim Bowles. Both Jim and Iris Ellen remembered that their winning tune was "Railroad Through the Rocky Mountains."

Jim Bowles was a highly regarded fiddler and old time banjo player who played with a number of groups, but rarely did so on a regular basis. Nonetheless, he was well known in the area, often working with Uncle Bozo. Tommy Bellamy, who played for years with Pat Kingery and the Kentuckians, remembered that, on occasion, Jim played guest spots with various groups during their programs on WKAY in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Jim had begun to play fiddle when he was ten years old, around the time World War I broke out. He learned his technique and most of his early repertoire from his uncle and neighbor, Wash Carter, who is remembered as a fiddler without peer in Monroe County. Jim also admired the playing of two other locally renowned fiddlers, Henry and Warner Carver, and picked up several of their tunes. Having learned his lessons well, Jim was playing for dances by the time he was fifteen.

In those days, square dances were held at neighbors' homes and took place at least once a week. House dances remained a popular form of entertainment until around the advent of World War II (Feintuch 1981). Because of his
skills, Jim found himself in constant demand to supply the dancers with good, solid dance music. At a typical house dance, all the furniture would be cleared out of the house to make room for the dancers, caller, and musicians. Sometimes these dances might continue all night long, with each individual set lasting thirty minutes or more. To provide for some variety and relieve the tedium of playing for a half hour without a break, Jim and his band would put together medleys of tunes. The band usually consisted of Jim on fiddle and whoever he could get to play banjo and guitar, such as the Biggers brothers of northern Monroe County. Sometimes it might be just fiddle and banjo, but the dancers wanted a guitar, too, if one was available. For all their hard work, the musicians did receive some pay. In order to dance, each couple had to pay to get on the dance floor. The money was turned over to the musicians. As Jim remembered, the pay was pretty good for the time:

They’d pay you. I think they gave us about twenty-five cents on the corner. Just would be a dollar, see, them four men. I think it’s four they had in a set, four men and four girls. That’d be twenty-five on the corner. That’s what they’d pay us, for a whole set.

Providing music for local dances gave Jim his first experience with being paid for playing music. However,
while he was still in his twenties, Jim began a musical partnership with Finley "Red" Belcher that would, for a short while, take him away from home and give him a taste of life on the road as a professional musician. From around 1930 until 1937, Jim and Red, who was from Emberton in central Monroe County, played throughout southcentral Kentucky at dances, pie suppers, picnics, and other events. In 1937, Red heard that WDZ, a radio station in Tuscola, Illinois, was looking for performers to play there. During the 1930s, WDZ was a pioneering country music station. It had a listening audience that extended throughout the lower Midwest into the upper South and was, at various times, the home base for a number of early hillbilly performers, among them the Carver Boys, Smiley Burnette, and Slim Miller.

Soon Jim, Red, and Red’s younger brother, Levy, were on their way to Tuscola. Calling themselves the Kentucky Coon Skinners, they landed a show that aired at six in the morning. According to Levy, the band’s program consisted of fiddle tunes and ballads, sentimental and comedy songs, and an occasional sacred number. While at WDZ, the group was kept quite busy. Not only did they play every morning, they played personal appearances most every night at theaters, fairs, picnics, and other gatherings. After about a month, the Kentucky Coon Skinners returned home and disbanded. Red was soon to return to Illinois and resume a successful career that eventually took him to several other radio
stations, including WMBD in Peoria, KWTO in Springfield, Missouri, WJJD in Chicago, and WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia (Belcher 1946).

Meanwhile, Jim and Levy decided to stay home. They were homesick and found their schedule in Tuscola much too grueling. Levy recalls that he did not think much of the musician’s life:

I didn’t care for it. It wasn’t my line of work. I was young. I was still in high school. I wanted to quit and come home and go to high school.

Life as a full-time musician was not for Jim, either. He was a family man with a wife and daughter to look after. He returned to his farm where he and his wife, Zelma, had some milk cows and raised some corn and tobacco. Though never a "professional," Jim remained musically active. Through the forties and fifties, he competed in fiddle contests and occasionally appeared on WKAY in Glasgow with Pat Kingery or as a guest on Uncle Bozo’s radio show.

In 1946, when Uncle Bozo was putting together his show for WKAY, he made sure that it included all the elements for which he was known. It was a show that would go over well in person, too. Uncle Bozo was emcee and usually sang a few numbers, accompanying himself on the banjo. He invariably tried to include a "girl act" in his show because
"that's what the audience wants to see" (Lawson 1965:10). On WKAY it was a sister act, The Calvert Sisters, Catherine and Mary. The sisters sang close harmony duets to the accompaniment of Catherine’s guitar playing. When making personal appearances the girls had a routine where they did some jitterbug dancing.

To accompany the dancing by the Calvert girls and Uncle Bozo, as well as providing accompaniment for some of the musical guests on the show, Bozo needed a good, versatile string band. It was at one of his talent shows that Uncle Bozo found the Walker Family. Nell Walker Fernandez remembers that day:

They had a talent contest in Edmonton. And all of us entered it . . . we entered the talent contest and won it. And he give us a job and put us on the road. And that’s how it came about. How Uncle Bozo, you know, came into our life.

The band was led by Sammy Walker, a fiddler and banjo player who lived with his family in the small settlement of Nobob in Barren County. Sammy was one of twelve children born into a musical family. His grandfather and father both played fiddle. His mother sang ballads and religious songs. Sammy was eventually to incorporate these musical traditions learned from his parents into the repertoire of his family
band. Soon after Sammy learned to play, he joined his brothers Charlie and Kerry in providing the music for neighborhood dances (Feintuch 1983).

In the late thirties Sammy had his own square dance band, consisting of himself on fiddle and James and Elzie Lawson on banjo and guitar. By this time, Sammy was married and raising several children with his wife, Bernice. As the children got old enough, Sammy began to teach them, one at a time, to play. Starting them off on the banjo or the mandolin, he then encouraged them to learn another instrument. Eventually, he had a family band. His daughter Nell recalls when it was her turn to start:

And I started playing the mandolin. I was about eight years old. And then he changed me off on the guitar and got to teaching me some chords. And then when Imogene got married, he told me I was gonna have to get on the guitar and drop the mandolin. Let Ivan have the mandolin, you know.

He started out with Imogene and Ivan and them playing. Then the next one was that he picked me and Robert, you know, to help out . . . he played the electric guitar at the time . . . then we just kinda fell in place with it, you know. And then Jo Ann, she got to playing the accordion some. And then me and her
got to singing together. They called her Little Jo and me Little Nell...

And then after I started growing up, I got to playing fiddle, see. And he’d have me come out. And he made me Pansy Stone, Girl Fiddler, added attraction. Uncle Bozo, he was carried away with me playing the fiddle. And Daddy, he’d lend me his fiddle and I’d play as a guest. I’d do two numbers on every show.

As might be expected, the Walker Family played a wide variety of music, reflecting the broad spectrum of taste and styles that made up country music in the 1940s and 50s. Sammy, the old time fiddler, was also quite comfortable playing smooth back-up fiddle on the then-current songs by popular country artists like Texas Ruby and Kitty Wells that Nell and Imogene preferred to sing, and on which Robert or Oren might play electric guitar. Bernice sang old folk songs and ballads of local origin, while Ivan was a fan of Bill Monroe.

The Walker Family band, in its varied configurations, played on WKAY with Uncle Bozo for many years, beginning in 1946. They continued to play an occasional personal appearance with him for awhile after he quit the station in the mid-fifties. In 1956, Sammy, Nell, and Ivan joined forces with another local old time fiddler, Gusty Wallace, and began to play weekly square dances at a dance hall at
Sulphur Well in Metcalfe County, Kentucky. Beginning the following year, Sammy, along with Nell and sometimes Ivan, began a two-year stint at WAIN, a radio station in Columbia, Kentucky.

Things were beginning to change some, however. Work for the family band began to dwindle. Nell, though, had begun to work as a guest with other groups and made several radio appearances in Tennessee with the McCormick Brothers bluegrass band. By 1960 she had her own program, The Little Nell Walker Show, on WTKY, a new station in Tompkinsville. Several local musicians played with her on that show. Among these were her father and Ivan, and a local banjo picker named Noel Cross. Nell had this program until 1968 when she left the station after a dispute with another musician there. The Walker Family's musical activities slowed down considerably in the 1960s and were mainly centered around less formal, community events. The family and their music gained some attention from a different quarter, the academic folklore community, in the sixties and seventies. In 1976, largely due to the interest and efforts of D.K. Wilgus, the Walker Family appeared at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. There they played to large numbers of people every day for a week. That, however, was to be their first and last such appearance outside of Kentucky. For the Walker Family, playing for an urban audience at a folk festival was a far cry from their
early days on the radio as part of the Uncle Bozo Show and an experience that is remembered fondly.

There was one other noted performer on WKAY who began his career there as a star attraction on Uncle Bozo's radio show. That person was Troy Basil, better to known to WKAY listeners as the Blind Troubadour. Troy brought his silk-smooth country voice and rock-solid guitar playing to the station as part of the Uncle Bozo show in 1946. Though he had played on a sporadic basis on WLBJ in Bowling Green previously, Troy got his first real radio experience on WKAY. He played on various programs at the station over the years both as a featured performer or as an accompanist for groups like The Happy Valley Quartet headed up by J.T. Light, a local gospel group that had its own fifteen-minute show on WKAY in 1947, and later as a member of Pat Kingery's band, the Kentuckians. Troy remembers that soon after he joined the station he was given his own show on which he sang primarily sacred material.

Though new to radio work, Troy was a seasoned performer by the time he came to WKAY. He had learned to play guitar and had begun singing country duets with a mandolin-playing friend while in a school for blind children in Louisville in the early thirties. He was playing for square dances around the Glasgow area with a fiddler named Alfred Jones by 1940. This association was to continue for nearly ten years. Such was Troy's skill at playing back-up guitar that he was a
highly sought after accompanist at fiddle contests. Troy remembers backing up the area's best fiddlers at these events, among them being Gusty Wallace, Jim Bowles, Alfred Jones, and Pat Kingery, in whose band he would eventually play.

Troy polished his skills as a performer by making regular personal appearances, both as a part of Uncle Bozo’s troupe and as front man for a band that included his brother Leroy Basil, fiddler Alfred Jones, and a guitarist named Ray Russell. The latter ensemble played mostly around Glasgow, but the Uncle Bozo show travelled as far away as Monticello, Albany, and Somerset in Kentucky, and Moss and Lafayette in Tennessee, playing shows at school houses, armories, and theaters. They played to all kinds of crowds under all kinds of circumstances. There were times the troupe would travel many hours only to have their outdoor program cancelled due to rain. Sometimes their audience could get a little rough. Despite this, the show would go on. Troy recalls one such incident:

I was playing one time with Bozo Carver down in Moss, Tennessee. A school building down there. We went down . . . we had the awfullest crowd there was, but we had to do two shows. Right in the middle of the second show, they got into the
awfullest fight out there was. We just kept playing. And they was fighting out there.

One of the girls, one of the Calvert girls said, "Uncle Bozo," she said, "They’re fighting out there!"

He said, "Did any of them come to you?"
She said, "No."

He said, "Well, are they any kin to you?"
She said, "No."

He said, "Well, damn it, let ’em fight."

Working with the Uncle Bozo show provided Troy with a lot of experience and allowed him to further refine his skills as a musician and entertainer. In 1948, Troy was to put these skills to use in a group known as Pat Kingery and the Kentuckians. He continued to work with this group until they disbanded around 1960.

Pat Kingery organized the Kentuckians in 1946 with the intent of playing on the new radio station that was being built in Glasgow. Tommy Bellamy, guitarist and singer with the group, was there the day the station went on the air in September of 1946:

And it was a 250 watt station. And we played the first day it opened . . . that’s the first day that this band had played together, I mean, you know, out anywhere. Pat Kingery and the Kentuckians.
The Kentuckians remained with WKAY for over a decade and played there until the station discontinued its live programming in 1960.

The band that played on WKAY that first day consisted of Kingery on fiddle, Tommy on guitar, Chester Huffman on mandolin, and Iola Weaver on string bass. Shortly afterward, Weaver left and Huffman took her spot on the bass. He was replaced by Bill Wagoner, who had been playing mandolin with another local string band, Jack Roller and the Ridge Runners. There were several other shifts in personnel over the years. Troy Basil brought his smooth singing and steady guitar playing to the band in 1948. Around 1950, the Kentuckians added an electric guitar, played by Al "Pappy" Shaw. When he left after a short stay, the band added Slim Slayton, a banjo player. His stay was also short-lived. But for a while, according to Troy, "We had a pretty good bluegrass band. We played Bill Monroe songs or we'd do songs like "John Henry" or "John Hardy". Just any of those songs like that." Tommy left the group for a short time in 1951 and took a job touring with another group of Kentucky origin, Uncle Henry and His Kentucky Mountaineers. However, he soon returned and rejoined Pat Kingery and the Kentuckians, tired of life on the road.

Shortly after WKAY began operations, Pat and the group settled into a busy schedule at the station playing two
thirty-minute shows Monday through Friday. Tommy recalls this period well:

We were all employed. We had jobs. These two broadcasts we had every day, they were our lunch hour. We had two thirty-minute shows back to back. And we'd just take off . . . we'd sing all through our lunch hour. We didn't nobody eat lunch. And we did that for years.

The group also had an hour-long program on Saturday that was broadcast from the George Ellis Drug Company, the drugstore on the square in downtown Glasgow and one of the group's many sponsors. Others included the Fred Johnson Clothing Store in Tompkinsville and the Standard Farm Store in Glasgow. During this program the band often invited guest singers and musicians to do a number or two with them. According to Tommy, the Saturday shows would draw enormous crowds.

These broadcasts brought the band a great deal of popularity. Pat and his group soon had a busy schedule, making personal appearances several nights a week and on weekends. Everywhere they went, the band played a mix of old time fiddle tunes, songs by popular artists of the time like Cowboy Copas and Hank Williams, and some they composed
themselves. It was a musical mixture that Tommy referred to as "just plain old hillbilly country music."

Pat and the band were highly sought after. For several years they were hired by the local rural electric cooperative to play at a big show they sponsored annually. The Kentuckians also played each autumn at the Glasgow Tobacco Festival throughout the late forties. In addition to their radio work in Glasgow, the Kentuckians played several times on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance which was broadcast over WHAS in Louisville at the time. Tommy and Troy both remember the group once entering and winning a contest at Renfro Valley. As winners, the Kentuckians travelled to Washington, D.C. with a square dance group and played there in a big arena.

The band also had the distinction of being one of the only country groups in the region to ever make any records. These were recorded between 1952 and 1954, according to Tommy, and were issued on the Goldenrod label based in Scottsville. Apparently Joe Dyson, the label’s owner, came to WKAY and made the recordings at the studio there. About six sides were issued. The material recorded mainly consisted of songs composed by Dyson. Two of the songs recorded by the Kentuckians featured some girl singers that were then appearing with them. "My Troubadour" was sung by the Russell Sisters. "Two-Toned Love" featured the singing of Elva Carver. The records did not sell very well and
never received much airplay, possibly due to some legal difficulties. Troy remembers that there was a problem with Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), an organization that continues to regulate and oversee performance rights and royalties:

Now this "Two-Toned Love," I mean it was going up in the charts pretty good. And we forgot to clear it with BMI down there. Boy, they killed that thing [laughs]. I mean, they killed it.

The records and the record company faded into obscurity. Despite this minor setback, Pat Kingery and the Kentuckians continued to play personal appearances and their radio shows on WKAY, and occasionally at Renfro Valley on through the fifties. By 1960 WKAY finally succumbed to what was a national trend and discontinued all programs of live music. Within a year, the Kentuckians had disbanded, having played together regularly for nearly fifteen years. Neither Troy or Tommy remember exactly when or why the group broke up. According to Tommy, "We just, maybe, just tired of it or decided to rest awhile. Wasn't no hard feelings or nothing like that. We just decided to quit awhile, I reckon."
CONCLUSION

Live country music on the radio in southcentral Kentucky was, for the most part, a thing of the past by 1960. Along with its demise came a new era of country music programming. What the listening audience would hear on the radio, specifically, whose records would be played, was largely determined by the dictates of Nashville-based record company executives. Gone was the diversity and vitality that was so much a part of live programming and part of what made local radio stations in places like Glasgow and Bowling Green an integral part of the social and cultural life of the communities to which they broadcast. Gone, too, were the days when one could turn on the radio to WLBJ, listen to programs like the Home Folks Frolic at dawn or The Hayloft Jamboree at noon, and hear the playing and singing of someone who might be a relative or a neighbor. This phenomenon, the intimacy between performers and their audience, was a most significant one as is the case with all forms of folk music and one that was reinforced by local radio.

The history of country music in southcentral Kentucky is, in some ways, not that uncommon and in other ways quite remarkable. Because the music's development has its
parallels in other rural areas throughout the country, especially in the South and Midwest, it may seem to the casual observer, rather common. Many of the stories that I heard from my informants contained many similar elements. Indeed, from person to person, some of the details were nearly identical. The remarkable part of this story is the dedication of the people involved. During the "heyday" of live radio broadcasting in Bowling Green and Glasgow, roughly from about 1946 through 1955, there were, in the area, many gifted and determined musicians who found in radio an outlet for their talents. In nearly every instance, music was, for them, a sideline. Music was then, as it is now, a less-than-secure means of making a living. Although there was a little money to be made playing radio and road shows, no one with whom I spoke relied on music as their sole source of income. These singers and pickers were dedicated amateurs, in the sense implied by the Latin roots of the word. They did it because they loved what they were doing. For what other reason would a group of grown men rush away from work every day at noon, as Tommy Bellamy described, missing their lunch so that they might get together and play a few tunes?

In this thesis, my intent was to assemble and present an account of the early days of country music in southcentral Kentucky, focusing specifically on those artists who were active during that era unique in the
history of country music, the era of live radio. Had I accepted the assumption that phonograph records would provide a satisfactory accounting of the story I was pursuing and then chosen to rely solely on them for documentary evidence, the outcome would have been totally different, if I would have unearthed anything at all. However, by aiming my investigation in the direction of other forms of mass media, print and radio broadcasts, and towards discovering primary sources, I was able to locate several informants and concentrate on the artists associated with WLBJ and WKCT in Bowling Green and WKAY in Glasgow, and thus able to accomplish a task that otherwise might not have been possible.

Despite the intention in this thesis, it is by no means the complete story of country music in the region, and in no way should it be regarded as such. It does not deal with those artists from the area who left and made a name for themselves elsewhere. It does not include discussion of the dozens of musicians whose tunes and songs were never heard beyond their own community. It does not address the activities of radio stations like WHOP in Hopkinsville and WHAS in Louisville. These stations, while located outside of southcentral Kentucky, had large listening audiences in the area and often featured area performers on their broadcasts. It should be noted, too, that local country music did not disappear with the end of live radio. It
continues to thrive in dance halls and road houses where people flock on the weekends to dance and visit with friends. A comprehensive history would surely have to include these numerous components. It is a story waiting to be told.

However, that story is one that will never be related if the research is based strictly upon the legacy documented by phonograph records. The evidence just would not be found using such an approach. Bill Malone is entirely correct in his assertion that although recordings are an important research tool, they provide only a one-dimensional view of the tradition of country music (1971). To rely entirely on them is to flatly disregard those artists, too numerous to count, whose performances were never captured on acetate or tape. Moreover, to dismiss these artists is to ignore fundamental aspects of the country music story, as it is the careers of these musicians and singers which best represent what country music may have been like for those who chose it as their profession or even as an avocation. To avoid neglecting the significant roles played by these countless lesser-knowns, it is imperative that researchers turn their efforts towards the activities with which most country music performers were involved, live radio shows and personal appearances. Then and only then will the whole story be told.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


INFORMANTS


