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Review of "Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South"

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Book Reviews

Rebecca Tolley-Stokes, Book Reviews Editor

Huber, Patrick. (2008). *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. 416 pages. ISBN 9780807832257

The title of *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*, as author Patrick Huber explains, is partially taken from a derogatory term for millhands working in the textile industry who would regularly leave work covered head to foot in lint after long shifts. If these workers still had energy during their time off, they engaged in a variety of leisure activities which often included listening to and performing music. Combining biography, sociology, and well-documented historical research, Huber describes how the rapid industrialization of the Piedmont South and the migration of rural workers to mill town communities situated there created a fertile environment and ready audience for early American country music, marketed as “hillbilly” music by record companies in the 1920s and 1930s. He shows how mill town life influenced the music created by and for workers and how mill wages earned (often for the first time in many lives) some disposable income that supported much of the early market for this music. The music, in return, assisted mill workers drawn to hillbilly music because it reminded them of their rural upbringing and addressed their common concerns to create new communities within the mill villages.

In addition to detailing the many reasons why hillbilly music resonated with and arose from these workers, Huber offers an extensive biography of four diverse musicians who once worked in textile mills and whose lives and art were influenced by mill town life. Atlanta’s Fiddlin’ John Carson was the first hillbilly musician to prove the commercial viability of country music with his 1923 “hit” recording of the minstrel song “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane.” A natural showman and self-promoter, Carson was already a well-known radio musician when first recorded. His original “hit” was followed by over 180 other recordings and he remained a popular recording artist until changing musical tastes and the Great Depression ended his recording career.

Huber also examines the brief, but influential life and career of the talented North Carolina banjoist, singer, and bandleader, Charlie Poole. An early exponent of

the three-fingered banjo style which would later be adopted as the signature sound of bluegrass music, Poole and his band, the North Carolina Ramblers, recorded several highly successful singles (or “sides”) between 1925 and 1930 featuring innovative arrangements of traditional songs and fiddle tunes, songs from minstrelsy and vaudeville theater, and parlor songs. Poole not only bucked the uniformity and structure of mill work, but he also fought against the constraints of the hillbilly music industry which restrained his banjo virtuosity to conform to the expectations of the record buying public. Poole’s rough, rowdy, and rambling ways (which made him unsuitable for the mill work he was still occasionally forced to take) and chronic alcoholism led to his early death at just 39 years of age.

Born into a North Carolina family of textile millworkers and a millhand himself by the age of twelve, Dave McCarn took up music as a means to escape the harsh realities of mill work. Although he worked in mills on and off throughout his life, McCarn was frequently dissatisfied with the work and was thought of by his contemporaries as a rambler willing to leave his work and family without warning in search of better opportunities or, perhaps, just a way out. His almost accidental recording career was launched when in 1930 he stumbled into an opportunity to record two songs, “Cotton Mill Colic” and “Everyday Dirt,” while he and his younger brother were just passing through Memphis, TN, looking for work during the height of the Great Depression. McCarn recorded few songs and, as Huber points out, is best known for “darkly comical social protest songs” such as “Cotton Mill Colic” which became popular with millworkers in the labor movement of the 1930s and with later generations of folksingers in and outside of the labor movement.

Howard and Dorsey Dixon, who recorded and performed as the Dixon Brothers, provide great contrast from the lives and recorded output of McCarn and Poole. Raised by a devoutly Christian family who constantly struggled with poverty despite their father’s various jobs in South Carolina textile mills, both sons followed their father into textile millwork. While both sons also followed the fundamentalist faith of their parents, Dorsey, who barely survived childbirth, believed throughout his life that God had saved him for a special calling. Although Dorsey, the primary songwriter of the pair, wrote both sacred and secular songs (many involving mill town life,) he was most “called” to write religious songs or songs memorializing and taking lesson from tragic events such as his most famous composition, “Wreck on the Highway (I Didn’t Hear Nobody Pray.)

These artists’ lives and music exemplify wide-ranging attitudes toward life and work of mill hands in the Piedmont South. Huber does indeed show that the experience of mill work and mill town life played a role in the development of country music. Appendices include a directory of Southern textile workers who made “hillbilly” recordings between 1923 and 1942 and a discography of the commercial recordings reissued on compact disc released by these workers.

The book is carefully indexed with extensive end notes and a bibliography. The double meaning of this enjoyable and interesting book's subtitle, *The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*, can be read two ways. Huber certainly proves that some influential country music and a large market for this music were created in the Piedmont South. The roots of country music emanate from many musical precursors and geographical regions, though, and are just too far-reaching for any one region or demographic group to claim without controversy that all the significant roots lie in their soil.

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