Rock & Roll’s Country Roots

Background

American country music has roots in the traditional music of primarily white, working-class communities, particularly in Appalachia and other regions of the South. Before recordings were common, musicians gathered in churches, town halls, and barns to sing and play music—often utilizing wooden, stringed instruments such as the fiddle, acoustic guitar, mandolin, and banjo. Record companies began marketing country music in the 1920s, and radio programs like National Barn Dance (out of Chicago) and the Grand Ole Opry (out of Nashville) reached rural and urban populations alike. The Carter Family—featuring A. P. Carter, his wife Sara Carter, and Sara’s cousin Maybelle Carter—and “Singing Brakeman” Jimmie Rogers created some of the first recorded examples of country music. Wider distribution allowed country to become a major part of the popular music landscape in the 1930s and 1940s, when figures like Hank Williams became stars. The singing cowboys of film and television, like Roy Rogers, brought in a Western influence. Bluegrass music, a style that emphasizes vocal harmony and virtuosic instrumental playing, emerged after World War II in the music of artists such as Bill Monroe.

In the 1950s, country was one of several genres that influenced early rock & roll; rock & roll with a strong country sound was sometimes called “rockabilly.” Johnny Cash began recording for Sun Records in Memphis, and his song “I Walk the Line” reached number 1 on the country charts and crossed over to number 20 on the pop charts. Cash incorporated both rock and country idioms throughout his long career. Wanda Jackson started her career as a country singer in Oklahoma, but she also recorded rockabilly numbers like “Let’s Have a Party.”

Playlist

- The Carter Family, “Keep on the Sunny Side” (1928)
- Jimmie Rodgers, “Jimmie The Kid” (1931)
- Bill Monroe, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” (1941)
- Hank Williams, “Jambalaya (On the Bayou)” (1952)
- Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, “Happy Trails” (1952)
- Johnny Cash, “I Walk the Line” (1956)
- Wanda Jackson, “Let’s Have a Party” (1958)