

Sturm, Twang, & Sauerkraut Cowboys:

Country Music and “Wild Western Spaces” in Europe

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

Country and western music in all its forms, from bluegrass to hard-driving country rock, forms a soundtrack for a multi-faceted, if amorphous, “wild west subculture” that thrives in many parts of Europe. Stoked, marketed and even created by mass culture, this “imaginary wild west” has achieved a self-perpetuating life of its own, forming a connected collection of “wild western spaces” based and built upon layers of yearning, imagination, and a sort of transformative nostalgia for something that may never have existed in the first place.

Over the past several years, on both sides of the former Iron Curtain, I have been roaming this colorful landscape and exploring the scope and variety of the sites, sounds, and distinct but overlapping “scenes” that make it up.

My route has taken me to: Wild west theme parks. There are well over a dozen major commercial theme parks in Europe, plus many smaller ones or western sections of broader amusement parks.

Pullman City Harz in Germany, one of the biggest, calls itself the “home of cowboys and country music.” It (and a sister Pullman City in Bavaria) attract hundreds of thousands of visitors a year and feature live country-music performances almost every day, while on-staff “singing cowboys” roam the dusty streets strumming guitars.

Saloons and country-style roadhouses, such as the “Buffalo Bill Etterem” in northern Hungary. Or “Dream Valley”

in Switzerland, which features live country acts — and also a cluster of tepees in its garden.

Western shops, booths, and stands, which sell everything from flouncy skirts, to cowboy boots and hats, to Native American jewelry and dream-catchers, to kitschy trinkets, flags and T-shirts emblazoned with Wild West or country music scenes or symbols.

Line-dance clubs and competitions:

There are hundreds of line-dance, square dance and other western dance clubs, many of them linked in national umbrella associations. Clubs meet in saloons, pubs and community halls, and dancers, many in elaborate costumes, flock to festivals and concerts, where special dance areas are often set up.

Re-enactor or hobbyist clubs and villages. Tens of thousands of Europeans study or even try to live like Native Americans, trappers, or other Frontier American archetypes as a hobby. There are various levels of obsession. Many take to

the woods on weekends to live in tepees or sleep “cowboy style” around a campfire. Some steep themselves in Native American traditions or stage detailed Civil War or Pony Express re-enactments. Some simply meet in clubs to socialize and listen to music. There are scores of such clubs in Germany alone. The immensely popular wild west adven-



Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber

Line Dancers at the Country Rendez-vous festival, Craponne Sur Arzon, France, July 2007.

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ture tales of the German writer Karl May have had a particularly important impact. May died in 1912 and never visited the American west, but his books (and later movies and other spinoffs) created one of Europe's most potent Wild West templates. Buffalo Bill, too, played a role. Germany's first Cowboy club was founded in Munich in 1913, on the heels of Buffalo Bill's hugely popular tours through Europe, and is still in operation. Beaver City in the Czech Republic is a private "western" town, located in a mythical Wyoming in 1867, where enthusiasts (members of a Westerners International "corral") dress up in period attire and live in their own, personal, and personally created, 19th century. None of the people I met there had ever been to the United States. Both times I've visited, a grizzled old-timer has taught me how to pan for gold.

There are also:

Rodeos, such as the one in St. Agreve in southern France, which is held annually as part of the Equiblues country music festival. Equiblues draws some 25,000 people to a town of under 3,000. For nearly a week, the whole town gets festooned with American flags and decorations, and American country music blares from loudspeakers in the streets as well as from the stage of the tented concert arena.

Equiblues is just one of scores and scores of bluegrass, country music, "trucker and country" and other country and western festivals, parties and events that take place in many countries from spring through fall. Some are one-day local offerings, others are major undertakings with an international draw. A variety of magazines, fanzines, newsletters and web sites provide listings and advertise events, reviews bands and CDs, offer translations of song lyrics and even print line-dance steps keyed to particular songs. American artists headline some of the festivals. A few, such as the Country Rendez-vous in Craaponne, France and the Country Night festival in Gstaad, Switzerland, make it a point to book mostly American acts. (At Craaponne, founded more than 20 years ago, 11 out of the 15 bands in the 2008 line up were from the U.S., including Asleep at the Wheel and Dierks Bentley.) At most festivals, however, the overwhelming majority of acts are homegrown country music artists who often sing their own songs written in the local language.

The annual 3-day Country Music Fair in Berlin is a special type of festival, where about 100 bands perform simultaneous half-hour sets on four separate stages. Organized for

years by a group that publishes a monthly called *Western Mail* and also ran a western-style saloon, the event enables festival-organizers, agents, promoters and club bookers to assess the acts, and gives musicians a chance to network and schmooze. Most of the artists are from Germany, and many if not most are only semi-professional. But artists also come from Poland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe, as well as from the United States, in order to make contacts and obtain bookings. They range from solo acoustic acts to rockabilly groups to Johnny Cash clones. Thousands of fans come to hear the sets, meet musicians and line-dance or two-step amid a razzle-dazzle of red, white, blue, and buckskin. Vendors hawk their wares, and most fans sport some sort of western attire, be it a cowboy hat and boots or a top to toe get-up.

Wild Western Spaces

Many of the ways in which Europeans embrace and embellish the mythology of the West are similar to the ways in which Americans do so. The clothing, the hobbyism, the music, the theme parks, the urban cowboyism, and so on. But Europeans approach it (or were approached by it) from afar, from a different, and in a way more disinterested, direction. However much they turn to Western (or country and western) trappings to enhance or inform their personal dreams and identities, Europeans approach the American West from within societies, nations and cultures whose own core identity does



Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber

Cowboys in Pullman City Harz, the German wild west theme park.

not depend on America's creation saga.

"Wild western spaces", thus, can be actual physical sites where people can enter and interact, but they can also be interior states of mind or other strictly personal expressions. Big or small, public or private, commercial or "pure," they are inhabited, physically and emotionally, by tens, even hundreds, of thousands of Europeans who feel totally at home in the mythology of the American West — who feel, in fact, that they own it, regardless of whether or not they have lived in, or even been to, or even want to go to North America. (Or even can go — the owner of a wild west town in the Czech Republic, Halter Valley, told me he had been rejected for a U.S. visa five times!) Feeling so at home, Europeans have developed their own "western" conventions and traditions that often have much more to do with themselves (and their dreams) than they do with America and the Wild West per se.

The German-American country artist Don Jensen evoked some of this wonderfully on a CD that came out a few years ago. On it, he sings about a German who has never been to



Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber

CASLAV, CZECH REPUBLIC — Czech banjo players mass for a unison performance at the 2007 edition of the Banjo Jamboree festival, the oldest bluegrass festival in Europe.

the United States but loves country music, takes his kids to rodeos, hangs a picture of Willie Nelson on his wall and in short creates a sort of German wild west dream world in which he actively lives out his fantasies. Jensen calls his song “Sauerkraut Cowboy.” The chorus runs: “He’s a sauerkraut cowboy, with Georgia on his mind, livin’ on Tulsa, livin’ on Tulsa, livin’ on Tulsa time...”

Keep It Country

Jensen’s Sauerkraut cowboy lives near Kaiserslautern, or K-town, the home of a large U.S. military base that was active throughout the Cold War. For the most part, country-western music was brought to Europe by and for the American GIs during and after World War II, and many Europeans, east and west, first heard it on broadcasts of Armed Forces Radio, or AFN, which were aimed at the resident Americans but could be picked up by anyone within range of the signal. As early as the 1940s, the USO brought American country stars to entertain GIs. In Germany in particular, fans also were able to hear live and recorded country music at officers’ and soldiers’ clubs, where they could mingle with Americans. Some German musicians began playing with American GIs in local bands. And there were also organized efforts to promote German-American friendship and fraternization.

Most of the DJ and recorded country western music heard at European venues is American, and a variety of American musicians tour and play live at clubs, festivals

and sometimes major concert halls or arenas. These are most often independent artists, but more established names also sometimes tour. Some American musicians make their homes in Europe or, like the Seattle-based singer-songwriter David Lee Howard, at least make their careers there. But dozens of homegrown artists flourish, too, and these provide the bulk of live musical production. Many of the local bands simply cover American songs — either in English or in local translation. Others, however, write original songs, again in either English or their mother tongue. The aesthetic quality varies widely. Some local musicians, responding to local sensibilities and local audiences, have ended up taking the American models, transforming them and making them their own, creating genres of sound and style that may still be called “country music” even though they may have only a passing resemblance to the original American product.

One of the first bands in western Europe to do this — and one of the most successful — was Truck Stop, Germany’s most durable country western band, which was formed in Hamburg in the early 1970s and is still going strong. Its musicians came from rock and jazz backgrounds, but from the start, Truck Stop adopted a cowboy image. Band members, then in their 20s, wore long hair, beards and moustaches like any rock musicians of the era, but they dressed in cowboy boots and hats and over the years have adopted ever more elaborate cowboy costumes. The Truck Stop logo in-

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cludes a pair of western pistols forming one of the “T”s. At first, the group sang American country western standards in English. Hoping for a bigger market, however, they switched radically in 1977, and began to sing in German. (Their most enduring hit is a song in which a weary German truckdriver laments that he is too far out of range of the AFN signal to hear his beloved country music — and in particular Dave Dudley, Hank Snow and Charlie Pride.)

Country western fandom today includes a number of different, but overlapping, scenes with different, but overlapping, musical preferences. There are fans who relate best to the local language version of country music and who dress up cowboy style to demonstrate their embrace of the music and the myth. There are fans who deplore the Sauerkraut (or kapusta or choucroute) cowboy trappings and scorn most local language efforts; these, they say, have debased the genre and created prejudice against country music as a whole. For them, the only real country music is American (or at least, American-style). Then there are the line-dancers, who don't really care what plays as long as they can scoot their boots. Naturally, there are anomalies: Pullman City Harz, for example, “the home of cowboys and country mu-

ful emotional amalgam merging the Open Road, the Frontier, cowboy culture, and Freedom comes, perhaps, to its most idiosyncratic (and, for many European lovers of American country western music, most debatable) fruition. I watched the German trucker favorite Tom Astor perform in Geiselwind's smoky, cavernous event hall. About 3,000 fans crowded at long tables, pressed up toward the stage, or milled about with beer mugs in their hands. Most of them sported cowboy hats, cowboy boots, leather vests, or embroidered shirts. Astor, a man in his 60s with perfect teeth and thick black dyed hair, was himself dressed in a cowboy hat, western shirt, soft leather vest, and cowboy boots, with a turquoise bracelet and silver rings. The audience whooped as he sang his most popular songs — one of them about a 14-day strike at the Brenner Pass between Austria and Italy, another called “Hallo Guten Morgen Deutschland.” As he sang, in German, projected images on the big screen behind him showed desert landscapes of the American southwest and then a huge American flag.

The logo of the annual Trucker festival at Interlaken, Switzerland, which I attended a couple of months later, made this even more explicit: it featured a drawing of a diesel truck and a wild west outlaw against the background of an American flag and an Alpine peak.

Traveling, the open road, borderless American spaces, the sheer size of the country, the mobility of the people, all play an extraordinary role in American songs and in the image of the country they project. We Americans simply never stay put. It's a powerful image for Europeans, where horizons have long been limited by borders and language, and where gasoline costs two or three times what it does in the United States. A heavy-set German truck driver I met at Geiselwind put it this way: “At some point, everyone wants to drive Route 66. Here in Europe, the European Union now makes it a lot easier, but we still have borders.” He told me his favorite country artists were Johnny Cash and John Denver — whose song “Country Roads” is probably the single most popular country-style tune in Europe. It's sung in all languages and all styles —



Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber

A “singing cowboy” in Pullman City Harz, a German wild west theme park.

sic” exalts the wild west image but its management has a policy of never booking German-language bands. Its one exception is Truck Stop, which plays one open-air concert there a season.

Truckers and Cowboys

Geiselwind is one of several festivals that form focal points of the so-called Trucker Scene, a subset of country western music and its European fandom, where the power-

once I even heard a disco version.

Hardcore members of the trucker scene sport an almost ritualistic dress, a cross between a cowboy and a biker, that utilizes a lot of leather and heavy fringes. They decorate their vests and hats with souvenir pins and badges from concerts, festivals, bands and events, and often attach a fox (or raccoon) tail to the backs of their cowboy hats.

To outsiders, this look, and German trucker country

Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber



GEISELWIND, GERMANY — Fans of the German country singer Tom Astor, at the annual Trucker and Country Festival, Geiselwind, May 2004.

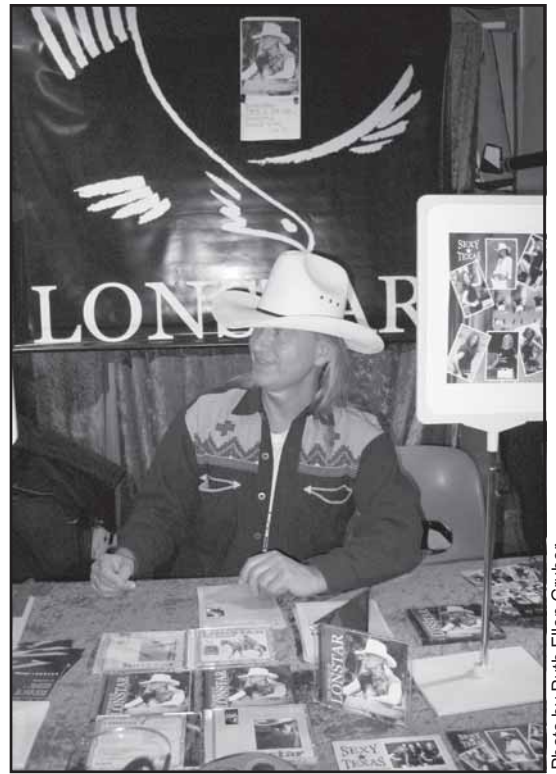


Photo by Ruth Ellen Gruber

BERLIN — The Polish country singer “Lonstar” at the Berlin Country Music Messe, Feb. 2007

music, have come to typify the German country scene.

Country Eastern

If America and its wide open Western spaces represented “freedom” in western European countries, the symbolism was all the more palpable in European countries that after World War II became part of the Soviet Bloc. “Every time I put on my cowboy hat and boots,” the Polish country singer “Lonstar” (MichaB•• uszczy•ski), who began singing country music in the 1970s, told me, “I felt I was giving the finger to the regime.” For Lonstar and others, playing or listening to American music — rock and roll, country, even jazz — was a symbolic way of protesting the communist regime. Country music sent particular messages. “There is a kind of freedom in that kind of music, it connected with roads,” Tomasz Szwed, a Polish singer long involved the Polish country scene, told me. “Maybe that’s the answer — when you are on the road you are free, going everywhere you want to [. . .] I mean, when you are on the road you can do everything you want to. You can go everywhere.”

Lonstar in 1982 helped found the Mragowo Country Piknik, an annual country-western festival in northern Poland. Its early editions were semi-clandestine; today it is still a major magnet for fans. Lonstar’s first album, with a band called Country Family, came out in 1983. Featuring a drawing of a big American truck bursting through a barrier on its cover, it became something of a hit, selling about 145,000 copies when it was issued. It included Lonstar’s best-known song, “Radio.” In it, Lonstar takes on the persona of a trucker — and he marvels, as he listens to the radio, how it was that Willie Nelson seemed to know “me and all my story. I only

wonder how come he knows of me at all.”

The myth of America has played a major role in the spiritual and intellectual development of Europe, and Europeans have spent centuries collectively fantasizing, creating and elaborating their visions with the overriding help of America’s own commercial, cultural and pop cultural exports. Within this framework, nothing, perhaps, has been as pervasive, enduring and iconic as the potent images associated with the American Frontier. Far West images sell goods, excite artists, color language, inspire lifestyles. They serve as fashion statements and shape political and even social discourse. On one level, Europeans commonly portray America as an uncouth cowboy, a swaggering gunslinger or international sheriff, obsessed with weaponry and imposing its will on the world. On another, in true “Urban Cowboy” style, many Europeans love to wear boots, jeans, Stetsons (or even fringed buckskins) and listen to — and create — country and western music. Some have long embraced an idealized vision of the frontier, its values, its exoticism, its Native people - and its freedom — as part of their own fantasies, desires and aspirations. 🐾

The author thanks...

... the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities for their generous support toward the research and writing of this paper.