

S Sturm, Twang, and Sauerkraut Cowboys: Country Music and "Wild Western Spaces" in Europe

Illustrations for this paper can be viewed online at:
<http://web.mac.com/ruthellengruber/iWeb/general%20site/Sturm%20Talk.html>

Ruth Ellen Gruber

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. In an essay written for the Autry Museum's 1999 exhibition on Wild West motifs in Polish poster art, Edward Buscombe and Keven Mulroy called America's frontier saga "the most successfully marketed national epic in history."¹ 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

¹ Buscombe, Edward and Kevin Mulroy. "The Western Worldwide," in Kevin Mulroy, ed., *Western Amerykanski: Polish Poster Art and the Western*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1999.

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.²

The evolution of the phenomenon has a long history. Buffalo Bill packed in the crowds when he toured Europe more than a century ago, traveling as far east as what today is Ukraine. Decades before that, *The Last of the Mohicans* and other works by James Fenimore Cooper took the Continent by storm. Europeans soon developed their own vast Frontier literary tradition -- these included, most notably, the wildly popular western tales by the German author Karl May. May, who died in 1912, never set foot west of Niagara Falls, but he created Europe's two most iconic Western characters, the Apache chief Winnetou and his sidekick, a young German adventurer called Old Shatterhand. Western TV shows and movies -- including hundreds of European-made "spaghetti westerns" and East- and West-German "Indian Films" of the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention "Marlboro-country" style advertising, have further refined the image and set codified parameters of language, reference, sounds and sets of values that, to the European mind, define the American experience -- and also, at times, their own. The Cowboy, the Indian, the lonesome western landscape; snakeskin boots, swinging saloon doors, ten gallon hats; the open road, the twang of a banjo or pedal steel guitar: all are instantly recognizable symbols loaded with layers of subtext and nuance.

Virtually Western

² One of the best evocations of the contradictory attitudes toward America remains Billington, Ray Allen. *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*. (New York: Norton, 1981).

By now, 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.³

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.⁴ 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

³ There is a considerable country and western scene in Great Britain, but for the purpose of my project I have confined my on-site research to continental Europe and, thus, non-English-speaking countries.

⁴ See Dorst, John. "Miniaturising Monumentality: Theme Park Images of the American West and Confusions of Cultural Influence." In Rob Kroes, et al., eds., *Cultural Transmission and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993) Dorst notes that the Wild West or Frontier America is "perhaps the single most common theme park imagery." Pg 256

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.⁵

-- 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.⁶ The first Cowboy club there was founded in Munich in 1913, on the heels of Buffalo Bill's tours, and is still in operation. Beaver City in the Czech Republic is a private "western" town, located in a mythical Wyoming in

⁵ For a discussion of what the author describes as an "ambivalent" relationship between country music and the dance scene, see Van Elteren, Mel. "Dutch Country Music: Between Creative Appropriation and Mere Epigonism," in *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1998

⁶ On the overall German fascination with the West, see Kort, Pamela and Max Hollein, eds. *I Like America: Fictions of the West* (Munich/Berlin: Prestel, 2006). This is a beautifully illustrated

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.⁷ 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 from spring through fall.⁸ 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

book of essays that accompanied an exhaustive exhibition held in the autumn of 2006 at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt.

⁷ See the Czech Westerners International web site, <http://www.westerners.cz/> -- it has a link to the Beaver City (Western City) site.

⁸ For a roundup discussion of some of the festivals that took place in several countries in 2003, see Hartman, Gary. "Texas Music in Europe," in *The Journal of Texas Music History*, vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2004.

Craponne, France and the Country Night festival in Gstaad, Switzerland, make it a point to book mostly American acts. (Craponne, founded 20 years ago, this year highlighted Texas music -- 13 of its 15 featured acts were from the United States, including Austin-based Joe Ely and the Derailers.) 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 runs 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.⁹ Most of the artists here 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. "Unless you've seen it its really hard to put into words," said Mark Merritt, an American musician long based in Germany. "It's a little like Mardi

⁹ The organizing team for the Country Music Messe split in 2008, and the venue for the 2008 Messe was changed from a community center in northern Berlin, where the American Western Saloon is located, to a more centrally located exhibition hall next to Ostbahnhof train station. Organizers said fire and safety authorities barred them from continuing to hold the Messe in the community center.

Gras with the costume, a lot of Europeans wanting to be country but not knowing what country is."¹⁰

David Lee Howard, a Seattle-based American singer who is a regular at the Fair and makes most of his career in Europe, put it this way: "It's a romantic way to dress yourself -- and instant freedom." Country music, he said, served as a "glue" that linked the varied elements of the overall scene. Howard tours in Germany and other countries for several months each year and even has a German fan club. One of his songs, called "Rodeo," is a paean to the Wild West theme park Pullman City -- called by its promoters a "living western town" -- where he performs several times each season.

Wild Western Spaces

As noted above, 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 not depend on America's creation saga. Europeans,

¹⁰ Interview, Berlin, February 2004. For an analysis of the German leisure-time cowboy scene, see *Freizeitkultur: Die Lebenswelt der deutschen Country & Western Szene*, a thesis for the Sociology Department of the University of Hamburg by Frank Theis. Viewable at <http://frank-theis.de/>. An analysis of the French country scene in 2004-2005 by the American-born French country singer Heather Danais of the group Steve & Heather, also written as a university thesis, can be found at <http://musique.france2.fr/country/dossier/16548774-fr.php?page=accueil>.

wrote Englishman David Hamilton Murdoch in his book, *The American West: Creation of a Myth*, "are outsiders looking in -- at an image of a world they never had -- and for them, the mythical West has been the best kind of escapism. The trappings of the myth for Americans are its essence for others."¹¹

"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.¹² (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. In a sort of reverse emigration, they have taken quintessential American roots and popular imagery and not only appropriated them but transformed them into their own hybrid realities. In other words, the inauthentic dream becomes -- or creates -- a new authenticity. It may be a "fabricated" authenticity,¹³ but it's a real phenomenon nonetheless. Everyone, an Italian friend of mine, who often dresses in a modified cowboy style, likes to say, is looking for his

¹¹ Murdoch, David Hamilton. *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*. Reno/Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2000. vii

¹² See Buscombe, Edward and Kevin Mulroy. "The Western Worldwide," in Kevin Mulroy, ed., *Western Amerykanski: Polish Poster Art and the Western*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1999.

¹³ See the use of this term in Van Elteren, op cit

"patria dell' anima," or homeland of the soul. I am fascinated by this transformative process, including the role played in it by country western music. It leads to questions that underlie my forays. What is meant by "American"? How do you measure "authenticity"? When does an imported practice become a "real" local tradition?

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 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ And there were also organized efforts to promote German-American friendship and fraternization. "I grew up with AFN and the American soldiers in West Berlin, and my idea was always that West Berlin was the 53rd state, but a state from America," Frank Lange, who runs Berlin's American Western Saloon and is one of the organizers of the annual Country Music Fair, told me. "We had a lot of Americans in Berlin, and we had a rodeo and German American [festival] every year, and that was important for Berlin." The withdrawal of most U.S. troops from Europe in the 1990s, and the consequent reduction of services and facilities, left a hole. At K-town, Don Jensen took me to eat in an Indian restaurant which 10 years ago had been Tom's Golden Nugget, a popular country music venue.

Though festivals today can draw thousands of people and line-dance clubs continue to proliferate, country western music forms a very small part of the commercial market in most parts of Europe. Figures for 2006 showed that country music sales amounted to just 2 percent of the German market, 1 percent of the UK market, and 3 percent of the Dutch market. It amounted to 8 percent, though, in Austria.¹⁶ Fans commonly complain that that

¹⁴ Earlier, movie singing cowboys such as Gene Autry were popular in some parts of Europe in the 1930s, and recordings by some "hillbilly" acts such as Jimmie Rodgers also found a market in some places.

¹⁵ For details on some of the AFN shows and their disk jockeys, and a description of post-war bands and music, see the chapter "Country Music in Europa," in Fuchs, Walter, *Das Neue Grosse Buch der Country Music*. (Koenigswinter: Heel, 2005). Also the chapter "Country Music - Made in Germany" in Jeier, Thomas. *Das Grosse Lexicon der Country Music* (Munich: Josef Keller Verlag, 2002). See also Malone, op cit

¹⁶ This compares with 13 percent in the United States. Figures from the International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI). See: Underwood, Ryan. "Country Music Struggles to Find Foreign Market." *The Tennessean*, Tennessean.com, Jan. 11, 2007. The online version of

there are few country music broadcast radio or television programs, and that it is difficult to find country CDs in shops. The Internet is changing the landscape somewhat, however. There are a growing number of local web sites and online radio feeds and podcasts, music can be ordered online or simply downloaded, and the internet also affords easy access to American websites and online programming.

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: this year, for example, saw tours by Kris Kristofferson and Ricky Skaggs, among others. Some American musicians make their homes in Europe or, like 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 artists try to hew as closely as possible to the original American style, imitating the originals and attempting to preserve the telltale American twang. But in many cases, 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 includes 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 1977 LP "Zu Hause" (At Home) included a song that became a hit, defined their style and helped them achieve cult status. It also opened the door to a broader genre of German-language country. "Ich Moechte so Gern Dave Dudley Hoer'n" (I'd Love to Hear Dave Dudley) tells of the frustration felt by a German truck driver, on the road late at night, unable to pick up the American Armed Forces Radio (AFN) signal and hear his favorite American country singers: Dave Dudley, Charley Pride and Hank Snow.

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.¹⁷ 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 music" 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.

And naturally, too, there are also fans whose tastes, behavior and lifestyle blur the lines.

One of these is a German man named Armin whom I met late one night in 2004, at the after-party for staff and friends following that year's edition of the raucous, three-day "Trucker and Country Festival" held in Geiselwind, Bavaria each May at Strohofer's Autohof, reputedly the biggest highway service station in Europe. A blandly handsome, clean-cut man in his early 40s, Armin was dressed top to toe like a modern cowboy. He wore a white Stetson, a western shirt that was still crisp at 1 a.m., blue jeans, and cowboy boots. His belt had silver studs spelling out his name, and on a chain around his neck he wore a big silver medallion in the shape of Texas, with a sparkling diamond indicating Austin.

¹⁷ See Fuchs, *op. cit.*, and Van Elteren, *op. cit.* Fuchs is particularly upset by the identification of country music with cowboys. He refused even to mention Truck Stop in his book on Country Music. He wrote: "[T]hat the German language country song, [. . .] with its interpreters dressed up like cowboys and its partly banal to infantile text has brought the altogether serious German Country Music scene into discredit is undisputed. Numerous friends of country music often do not dare to 'out' themselves in front of their friends for fear of being identified as a fan of German language country songs. [. . .] The German language country song and the original country song from the U.S.A. are worlds apart." (p.--) Thomas Jeier gives German country music a much more sympathetic treatment in his *Grosse Lexicon* *op. cit.*

"Country music is my life," he told me, as we chatted against the background of CDs playing American country hits from a boom box placed on the bar.

Talking with Armin was a bit like talking with a trans-sexual. Armin felt, he told me, as if he were a Texan, born mistakenly into a German body. He had visited Texas two or three times and loved it. His clothes were from Texas -- not locally bought, and he spoke English with a Texas accent. He even, he said, preferred Lone Star Beer to any German brew. Armin has an executive-level job at a 5-star hotel in Berlin, but, he said, none of his colleagues knew of his private passion. On the weekends, however, he could slip into his Texan skin and be himself. He was a regular at Berlin's American Western Saloon, knew the words to every American country song, said he hated German-language country music, and was a dynamite western dancer.

"Do you know Alan Jackson's song about September 11th?" he asked me. When I said I didn't, he riffled through a box of CDs, chose one, and put it on the boom box. We stared at the player as Jackson began singing -- "Where were you when the world stopped turning ..." -- and tears came to my eyes. "Oh, sorry!" Armin apologized, concerned that the song had upset me, stopping the track. "But that's why I love country music!" He selected another, more upbeat tune, pushed the play button, put down his beer on the bar, and opened his arms. "Do you want to two-step?" he asked.

I later learned that Armin's predilections were, in fact, received through his genes. His father, Ronnie, in his early 60s, also wears modern cowboy clothes and is just as much a self-described "country music freak" as his son. "Country music is the only music I can live with," he told me. "It goes to the brain and from the brain to the stomach; when it goes there, it's OK."

Ronnie worked for many years on a U.S. military base, and -- like so many others -- fell in love with country music through his contact with American servicemen and the broadcasts of Armed Forces Radio. In a sense, Ronnie told me, "I think I'm part of America " -- even though, when I spoke with him, he had never been to the United States. In his apartment, he told me, he had one room dedicated to "country": CDs, records, books, cassettes, and posters on the wall of Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash and Hank Williams.

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 powerful emotional amalgam merging the Open Road, the Frontier, cowboy culture, and Freedom comes, perhaps, to its most idiosyncratic (and, for many lovers of American country western music, most debatable) fruition. Two nights before I met Armin, I watched the German trucker favorite Tom Astor perform in Geiselwind's smokey, 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. "Ach, the yearning for the endless freeways and highways of the American west," Geri Stocker, who produces a weekly country music show for Swiss radio, wrote in Interlaken's 2004 program. "This fascination for the 18-wheelers... Not to mention the biker's dream of Easy Rider." Stocker is an astute observer of the country scene. "Let's have no illusions," he added. "In far away, small, narrow, cozy Switzerland, we naturally can't manage all this; America remains inevitably the backdrop for our longing."

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. We're always *Leavin' on a Jet Plane* or covering *Miles and Miles of Texas* or even just *Movin' On*, revisiting *Highway 61*. Big wheels keep on turnin' as we do some *hard travelin'* or spend *Six Days on the Road*. And it doesn't matter whether we're *Truckin'*, just *ramblin' round* or gently *ridin' Old Paint*. We're always on the move, *Like a Rolling Stone*. 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."¹⁸ 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 -- once I even heard a disco version. "We love country music, we identify with it," the trucker told me. "Keep on trucking -- it's good. We do the same as the American truckers do, we listen to the same music, we dream the same dreams. That's what matters for truck drivers all over the world."

Trucking songs have been part of the American country western repertoire since before World War II and probably represent the most common form of modern country songs that relate to work.¹⁹ The genre exploded in the 1960s and 1970s, after Dave Dudley's breakthrough recording of "Six Days on the Road" in 1963, and crossed over into the public consciousness with the C.W. McCall hit "Convoy," about a trucker strike. "Convoy" inspired a 1978 movie that starred Kris Kristofferson as a dynamic trucker called Rubber Duck who led a rebellion of other long haulers. The movie drew an explicit parallel between long haul truckers and earlier mythic Western heroes. Truckers, the off-screen voice of a character intones at the end of the film, were "a lonely breed. Hard men, proud men. Not too proud to cry nor shed a tear, the living embodiment of the American cowboy tradition."

Like Americans, European fans embraced the genre. Over the decades, European trucker fans, particularly in Germany, have created their own take, their own customs and their own hybrid music. Colored by the oom-pah of

¹⁸ The dream is such a real one that for several years, a Canadian firm has set up a desk during the Geiselwind festival to recruit truck drivers for Canada. At the 2007 Geiselwind festival, they met with about 80 applicants. Their goal, they said, was to bring over about 100 drivers a year.

¹⁹ See Malone, pg 320-321. Also Rogers, Jimmie. N. *The Country Music Message: Revisited* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989) p 198-200

mainstream German pop, sung by Tom Astor, Truck Stop and a clutch of other artists, this frequently edges far beyond the border of any sound ever originating in Nashville, Austin or Bakersfield. Trucker, or trucker-and-country, festivals originated 25 or 30 years ago as meeting places where truck drivers who lead solitary, and strictly regulated, lives behind the wheel could get together and party. Though held less frequently than in earlier years, they still serve this purpose. But each is also a mix of carnival and shining chrome that by now attracts a wide spectrum of fans, loosely linked by their love of country music, as well as by the family-friendly festive atmosphere and their curiosity about the heavy metal hardware. Big festivals may host hundreds of shiny trucks on display, many of them elaborately airbrushed with American frontier themes. Concession areas, sometimes called "western villages," proffer everything from cowboy hats to both US and confederate flags. (To European fans across the board, the latter have little to do with the Civil War but symbolize anti-establishment rebelliousness. The editor of a French country music magazine, for example, calls his publication "Country Music Attitude" and uses the rebel flag as part of its logo.)

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. (I asked vendors, musicians and fans about the fox tail, which is also seen in Poland and the Netherlands, but no-one could tell me the origin of the practice. Some guess that it is related to putting a fox tail on the antenna of a car; others think it might be an

attempt to combine the cowboy and the trapper look. Possibly it harks back to the U.S. Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion, or "Swamp Fox," whose character in the eight-episode, 1959-61 Disney television series of the same name wore a "tail on his hat." I think, though, like so many visual and other elements, the practice goes back, even subconsciously, to Karl May stories -- one of May's characters, Old Firehand, is described as wearing a tail on his hat, and several characters in the Karl May movies of the 1960s are also costumed that way. But going back even further than that, in the early 17th century Franz Hals painted a portrait, on show at the Kimbell Museum in Forth Worth, Texas, of a man with a fox tail on his hat. The description of the painting on the Kimbell web site calls it "the fool's fox tail." Various sources describe how the fox tail has formed part of the traditional costume of jester-like Fool figures at Carnival time -- in England and in Germany, where they are called Narren -- and also Morris dancers.)

To outsiders, this look, and German trucker country music, have come to typify the German country scene -- to the chagrin of fans who say it has also played a role in marginalizing country music as a whole. "These people indirectly scare away other folks from country music," an observer of the German scene who did not want to be quoted by name, complained. A lot of people, he said "won't go to a country festival because they assume that if [they] want to go to a country festival [they] have to look like this. And they don't identify with that persona. [. . .] They see people dressed like this at country festivals and they say that's not me, so I can't associate with this music, either."

Two people who clearly feel differently are Annette and Stefan Herrnbredel, whom I met at Geiselwind this

year. During the festival, they were camping out with their kids in a tent that was decorated with American flags; they were frying steak on a grill, and they were using a country music songbook to help them sing to the strum of Stefan's guitar. Stefan, who had short cropped hair, a moustache and a tattoo of a bald eagle on his chest, speaks little English. The couple's favorite band is Truck Stop, partly because it sings in German, but their favorite song is "Country Roads" -- and they sang it for me, in a sweet duet. They were building a new house, they told me, that would include a den decorated like a western saloon. The couple had gotten married three years earlier, at Geiselwind, during the Trucker festival. They had dressed in Old Wild West attire for the ceremony, and their guests all wore cowboy hats and boots. Afterward, the big trucks lined up on the pavement all blew their horns in a salute.

I asked Annette, a secretary, what attracted her to the scene. In short, she said, it was the feeling of freedom. America had always been the symbol of freedom, she said. The flags and the cowboy imagery, she said, recalled that "like in the wild west, they can ride with horses over the horizon and so on, and that's a little bit [of what] we want to have here in our hearts. We don't need some horses to be free!" she said. "But [it's] the feeling." The music, she said, "is something special -- it goes under the skin. It goes directly into the heart, and you can't say why. It's like a virus."

Where do the trucks fit in, I asked her.

Again, she replied, it was freedom. "You're on the road again," she said. "It's like the old dream that people have. To ride in the sunrise. It's the same [thing] when you're sitting in a truck and you can drive in the sunrise. I think it's the same. It's some symbol for that."

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" (Michał Łuszczynski), 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 in 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."²⁰

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 an American trucker. "I've run this country coast to coast, I know its highways better than my home," he sings -- poignantly, considering that the song was written just

after Poland's Solidarity movement was crushed and the country came under a strict martial law regime. Willie Nelson's lyrics, he sings (in both a Polish and an English version), go straight to his own heart. "Easy words, easy tunes, and yet my heart is going. Such an easy rhyming, yet teardrops start to roll. I'd think that Willie knew, me and all my story. I only wonder how come he knows of me at all."

Czechgrass

Of all Continental European countries, east or west, it is the Czech Republic where American folk and country music, and particularly bluegrass, have been most totally assimilated, or reinvented, as genuine local traditions. A country music and bluegrass scene began developing in the mid-1960s, essentially in isolation. So-called "Czech Country" music, sung in the local language, became an institution and still remains a fertile, if self-contained scene;²¹ local singers of the genre, in particular the corpulent but charismatic Michal Tucny, became local stars in the 1970s and 1980s. Tucny died in 1995 but is still revered: his gravesite is the object of pilgrimage, and thousands attended a country music festival in the heart of Prague this summer to mark what would have been his 60th birthday. The headline guest was an American singer named Rattlensnake Annie, who recorded and toured with Tucny in the 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, Prague's Country Radio, with Czech Country its staple, was the newly democratic country's most popular station.

²⁰ On the importance of the Western Myth in communist Poland, see *Western Amerykanski*, op cit

²¹ See web sites such as www.countryworld.cz and publications such as *Folk & Country* and *Western World* magazines.

Founded in 1991, Country Radio still programs 65–70 percent local Czech-language music, rather than contemporary American country. Its target market is people over 45 who regard the "Czech country" songs of their youth as golden oldies.²²

Bluegrass music in particular, though a minor part of the overall country, folk and acoustic music scene, has won such a skilled and devoted following that, in many senses, it has become a real, local Czech idiom.²³ Today, there are scores of Czech bluegrass groups. Czech artisans produce banjos and mandolins used by American and other players; Czech bluegrass musicians win international prizes; and dozens, even hundreds, of bluegrass and other acoustic folk festivals take place around the country each year.²⁴ The annual Banjo Jamboree, which takes place at the town of Caslav at the end of June, is reckoned to be the oldest bluegrass festival in Europe. It was founded in 1973, just six years after the first full-fledged bluegrass festival was held in the United States. At the Banjo Jamboree in 2005, some 65 five-string banjo players played, all together, two classic instrumentals of the bluegrass repertoire, "Cripple Creek" and "Foggy Mountain Breakdown." The session was an apparently successful attempt to set a record for the number of banjo pickers playing in unison. This year, two dozen groups took part in the festival; only one of them was from the United States.

²² Interviews with Country Radio DJ Mirek Hren and others, Prague, July 2007

²³ What promises to be one of the best places to learn about Czech bluegrass is a new blog by the American fiddler Lee Bidgood, who is doing his PhD on the music and its scene.

<http://blidgood.wordpress.com/> Also see: Buff, Margot, "Deep South Bohemia," Prague Pill, June 23, 2003. Viewed online as <http://prague.tv/pill/article.php?name=south-bohem>

²⁴ Musicians and music writers gave me estimates of up to 200 or more bands and between 120 and 520 folk, country music and bluegrass festivals of all sorts. Slavomil Janov, the editor of *Western World* magazine estimated in 2004 that there were between 150 and 200 festivals.

The transformation of Wild West dreams and especially of American-style folk and country music into local Czech traditions dates back more than 80 years, to the development of the so-called Tramp Movement, a uniquely Czech outdoors and music subculture that originated after World War I and is still going fairly strong. Typically, Czech tramps were urbanites who took the train out of big cities on Fridays and spent their weekends "living free" -- hiking, canoeing, sleeping under the stars and sitting around campfires, strumming guitars and singing. They called the experience "going to America" and romanticized the American west, taking inspiration from western movies and novels, including works by authors as diverse as Jack London and Karl May -- the 19th century German writer whose wild west adventure tales were so popular and influential in much of Europe. "People couldn't travel, so they took the romance and made it at home," said Lilly Pavlak, a bluegrass fan and longtime member of the tramp movement.

Czech tramps often dressed in cowboy hats and bandanas, gave their camp sites names like "Colorado" and "Arizona" and decorated them with totem poles, tepees, log cabins and other hybrid frontier imagery. They wrote poetry with western themes and created artwork that both idealized and embraced the American Frontier. Tramp songs, meanwhile, evolved from the informal stuff of campfire camaraderie into a full-blown genre of Czech popular music that merged local folk traditions with American folk songs, country music, and Hollywood singing-cowboy songs, as well as jazz and pop. A recent compilation of tramp songs originally recorded between 1920 and 1939 features performances by groups with names like Settlers Club, Camp Boys and Westmen.²⁵ The music is acoustic choral singing, to the accompaniment of guitars

and a regular beat. The CD booklet features drawings of totem poles surrounding a sepia photograph of a group of young men strumming guitars and seated in the woods outside a log cabin bearing the name "Hudson" spelled out above its door.²⁶

The tramp movement remained strong under communism, despite periodic attempts by the authorities to regulate it. Lilly Pavlak herself described to me how, when she was 15, she and her sister were arrested when on a tramping jaunt in Slovakia and accused of "spreading American ideology."

Lilly took me to several tramp gatherings. One was a "tramp potlach" -- an all night sing-a-thon held around a blazing bonfire and well lubricated with freely flowing beer. The term derives from "potlatch" -- the term for the ceremony among native cultures in the Pacific Northwest at which hosts give away their possessions to their guests. The potlach I attended, in 2005, was held to celebrate the 45th anniversary of a tramp club near Brno. There must have been 300 people present, most in their 50s or 60s and most dressed in the green army surplus that has replaced cowboy gear as typical tramp attire. We gathered in a lush clearing that had long served as the club's regular *osada*, or camp site. At the edge stood four totem poles built by club members decades ago; a small tepee was set up next to a log cabin very similar to the one pictured in the tramp music CD booklet. At dusk, there was a ceremony to light the bonfire, with pennants bearing Indian-style symbols hoisted. Then the singing began, song after song, straight through until daybreak. Most had lilting

²⁵ *Trampske pisne 1920-1939* Supraphon (SU 5379-2 301) 2002

²⁶ On tramping, tramp music and the symbolism of American West for Czechs, see Sparling, Don and Tomas Pospisil, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at America." *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 27 (Brno: Masaryk University, 2001). Viewed online at: www.phil.muni.cz/angl/bse/archive/BSE_27_08.pdf

melodies with a regular beat -- real "campfire songs." There must have been a dozen people with guitars, and, as far as I could tell, no song was ever sung twice.

Paradoxically, it was the strict communist system that enabled bluegrass to become so embedded as a Czech idiom. One seminal event is almost legendary as a catalyst: a series of concerts given by Pete Seeger in March 1964 as part of a world tour. Seeger, an avowed leftist who was blacklisted for a time in America, was booked by the official Czechoslovak concert agency in part because of his politics. He was, recalled his friend Gene Deitch, "an example of a 'progressive' American performer, singing for the rights of the 'oppressed American masses,'" and "all those living in the darkness of [the] 'imperialist' American society."²⁷

At his Prague concert, Seeger played a mix of traditional American folk songs, songs from other cultures and even a few folk revival protest songs. His performances electrified tramp music fans and changed the face of the Czech acoustic music scene. Lilly Pavlak saw him in Brno. Seeger, she said, "sang a lot of songs we knew from tramp music, and so I realized that they must be American originals, not just tramp songs. That was the defining moment not just for me, but for the entire bluegrass movement that followed."²⁸

²⁷ Quote from the information booklet by Gene Deitch to Deitch's recording of Seeger's March 27, 1964 Prague concert, issued in 2001 as *Pete Seeger in Prague 1964* (Flyright FLY CD 68).

²⁸ Seeger described the concert in a letter: "Last night I had my first concert [in Czechoslovakia], with a shaky weak voice. Plunged bravely on, with help of a very nice woman interpreter. Audience exceedingly friendly, but very shy. Like blues especially. Listened politely through my singing of strange and unfamiliar things. Stood clapping for ten minutes at end. O, maybe seven. But I was mightily flattered. Maybe partly it was because I was the first American performer in 18 years to have sung in Brno. But I could not get them to open up and really sing." Quoted in Todd Harvey and Steven Winnick, "The Incomplete Filmmakers: The Little-Known Career of Pete and Toshi Seeger," *Folklife Center News*, Winter/Spring 2006, pg. 7. Viewed online at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/news/pdf/afcnews-winterspring-2006.pdf>

What particularly struck fans was Seeger's long-necked, five-string banjo. According to legend, Seeger's performances marked the first time after World War II that a five-string banjo was seen and heard live in Czechoslovakia. A Czech art student named Marko Cermak, who was active in the tramp music scene, became so excited that -- according to his own and other accounts -- he built his own banjo by studying photographs taken of Seeger at the Prague concert and blown up to life size. Cermak went on to become one of Czechoslovakia's first banjo virtuosi, the father of five-string banjo playing in the country -- godfather in effect to the 65 banjo players who set the record in Caslav for unison playing.

In 1965, Cermak -- along with other tramp musicians including the singer, songwriter and artist Honza Vycital -- founded Czechoslovakia's first American-style country and bluegrass group, the Greenhorns. The group, soon fronted by the popular Michal Tucny, became extremely influential by playing Czech language versions of American folk songs, copying arrangements they heard clandestinely on Radio Luxembourg or AFN or gleaned from the rare, and precious, tape or LP that came their way. With their Czech versions of songs like the "Orange Blossom Express" and "T for Texas," the Greenhorns and similar groups brought these songs firmly into the local musical tradition, fostering a total assimilation of many songs into the Czech repertoire. "I only realized that this was American music much later than when I first heard it," Lubos Malina, an award-winning banjo player with the progressive Czech bluegrass group Druha Trava, told me. "I was a teenager, 12 or 13 years old, when I first heard these songs, sung in Czech by Czech groups."²⁹

²⁹ Vycital, who has written the Czech lyrics to scores of American country and bluegrass songs, told me (in March 2007) that he didn't aim to create faithful translations. "I translate only the title, the refrain," he told me. "I don't understand all the words, but I have

This assimilation was intensified by force after the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, when official censorship made much of America's cultural production taboo. The censors permitted groups to play bluegrass, folk and country music, which performers convinced them was the music of the "oppressed" American proletariat. Still, when performing in public they had to sing in Czech, and censors scrutinized the lyrics. Music groups were also forbidden to have English names, so the Greenhorns had to change themselves into the "Zelenaci;" a fellow group, the Rangers, became "Plavci." Then, too, though, the authorities recognized that allowing people to escape into homegrown wild west fantasy worlds or the "musical simulacrum" of country western music staved off threats of real protest.³⁰ Escape into such private "homelands of the soul" was often referred to as "internal emigration."

The 1968 crackdown, however, also opened up access to original American music. Many Czechs, including Lilly Pavlak, emigrated to the west, and from there they made tapes of bluegrass from American LPs and sent them to their friends back home. Czech fans copied and recopied these tapes and passed them around from player to player, like secret, even slightly subversive, messages from across the global divide.³¹ Lilly could not return to

imagination from it. The atmosphere. I know the title, the first part of the refrain, and I imagine approximately what the song is."

³⁰ Sparling and Pospisil, op cit, pg 81. Also: Bren, Paulina "Weekend Getaways: the Chata, the Tramp, and the Politics of Private Life in Post-1968 Czechoslovakia," in Crowley, David and Susan E. Reid, ed. *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (New York: Berg, 2002)

³¹ In the 1970s and '80s, parallel to and overlapping the country and bluegrass scene, a singer-songwriter "folk scene" emerged, influenced by protest artists such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Folk music festivals, such as Porta, with their "intangible conspiratorial atmosphere" drew tens of thousands of fans. See: Pavlickova, Helena. "The History of Czech Modern Folk Music," in *Musicologica Olomucensia V*, AUPO 2000, pp. 113–122. Viewed online at: publib.upol.cz/~obd/fulltext/Aesthetical19/Aesthetical19_07.pdf See also: Sparling and Pospisil, op cit.

Czechoslovakia until 1987. When she did, she found evidence of how widespread her own influence had become. During that trip, she told me, some people who picked her up hitch-hiking were listening to a bluegrass tape in the car. It turned out to be a copy of a copy of a copy of a tape that Lilly herself had put together 12 years earlier and sent to friends. "The quality was terrible," she said, "but it was bluegrass, and I was home again."

Since the fall of communism, the field has become wide open. Pete Seeger is ancient history. Younger bluegrass musicians can scarcely remember the communist period and only know by hearsay the anti-establishment symbolism then accorded American sounds and settings, the excitement of discovering and absorbing them, and the political realities that affected and helped chart the music and the scene. For them, bluegrass (and all the rest) has simply always been there.

Today, Czech bluegrass spans a broad spectrum, mirroring that in the United States and other countries: Czech bands are active members of organizations such as the International Bluegrass Music Association and European World of Bluegrass. At one end of the spectrum there are groups that attack the music in an almost scientific way in a meticulous effort to recreate the exact sound American Appalachia: some, like the band Sunny Side, whose members are in their late 20s and early 30s, adopt the retro costume and one-mike stage style of Bill Monroe.³² Most other bands follow current American trends; singing both in English and in Czech, they buy CDs, download tunes and look to contemporary U.S. artists for their inspiration.

³² Sunny Side also does a show paying homage to the Greenhorns and other stars of Czech country.

My favorite group in the Czech bluegrass scene is Druha Trava, which does something rather different. The group includes bluegrass standards in its repertoire, but as the band's name -- "Second Grass" -- implies, they for the most part reach far beyond the classic bluegrass genre for inspiration, using American roots music as a launch pad for a synthesis of jazz, pop, folk and even classical motifs. In doing so, Druha Trava transforms the quintessential American idiom into a richly textured, highly personal statement - their own "patria dell' anima" -- that defies genre definitions. This is precisely why I like their music so much. Their impact is largely due to singer-songwriter Robert Krestan's original songs and distinctive gravelly voice. His complex and sometimes elliptical lyrics have been compared to those of Bob Dylan. Druha Trava was formed in 1991. In the 1980s Krestan was with another band, Poutnici, which also experimented this way.

The American banjoist Tony Trischka played with Poutnici on an LP issued in 1989.³³ It was clearly aimed at a foreign audience. The liner notes were in English and all the songs were performed in English, too, including several of Krestan's own compositions. In the notes, Trischka described Poutnici in much the same terms I use to describe Druha Trava. "They ... have a unique sound," he wrote. "Czechgrass instead of Kentucky bluegrass. In other words, they've made it their own, which is wonderful."

³³ *Wayfaring Strangers*, Supraphon, 1989