

COMMENTARY

Americana Music in the UK

As part of our ongoing series of articles on the state of Americana music around the world, Americana Homeplace contributor John Davy takes a look at the Americana music scene in the UK. John Davy resides in Scotland and is a regular contributor to Scotland's Americana Roots webzine Crooked Rain, as well as NetRhythms.com and WhisperinAndHollerin.com.

Just as Americana has always been with us - under other names - so UK Americana has always been there, too, bouncing along in the wake of American musical innovations. Ever since the movies introduced British audiences to cowboy heroes there have been receptive audiences here for the atmosphere and landscapes of what we now call Americana. Before he became a global pop star, Elton John produced a whole album of songs evoking the American south and west – as perceived from the English Home Counties. Others, more straightforwardly, made their *homages* to the smoothed out music that had become "Country and Western": Dusty Springfield "went to Memphis", and, fifteen years later, Elvis Costello recorded "Almost Blue" in Nashville. More significantly, perhaps, Keith Richard hung out with Gram Parsons, which introduced a twang to the Stones' sound, and, about the same time, Sandy Denny covered "Tomorrow Is A Long Time" with the help of Sneaky Pete Kleinow on pedal steel.

Now that Americana is a marketing category all of its own, how does the current UK scene look? First and foremost, there is considerable enthusiasm for American acts that find their way over here; most festivals that aren't strictly rock/pop will have a handful of Americana acts, and "alt-country" acts in particular have quite large, loyal followings. On Radio, BBC Radio 2's Bob Harris is the most high-profile promoter of all things Americana, but he's far from being a lone voice. Several programs on BBC Radio Scotland, and regional programs elsewhere in the UK offer regular chances to catch up on new releases and touring artists. In print, Maverick magazine has been providing substantial material for Americana fans in the last few years, whilst magazines with broader interests, such as Uncut, also find space to cover what's new and good. On the web, there are several sites run by enthusiasts – notably NetRhythms and Americana UK – that keep people up to date with plenty of gig news and reviews, and copious album reviews, too.

But what about the nitty-gritty – British Americana music? I should mention first the vibrant, even mildly obsessive, bluegrass scene. This has been thriving for many years now and has spawned a handful of summer festivals devoted purely to bluegrass. There are plenty of excellent players and bands that would hold their own against their American counterparts – Glasgow's Moonshiners being a fine example, with an authentic sound and a tremendous sense of fun.

Albert Lee, of course, has been packing halls and pubs up and down the land for years, singing songs that are the very essence of Americana. Sid Griffin, an American émigré, has long flown the flag with the Cole Porters in pursuit of the Parsons/Hillman legacy. One of the Cole Porters, Pat McGarvey, has now got together the Southern Tenant Folk Union, which I guess is a take on the string band revival. A mixture of old hands and new faces, they have recently been touring busily to considerable acclaim. The Redlands Palomino Company and the Broken Family Band are both also highly rated and popular on the summer outdoor circuit. It seems the most enthusiasm to hear and to play this music is to be found in Scotland and Ireland, and Scotland in particular is buzzing with bands influenced by the rockier end of Americana: the Cosmic Rough Riders, the Endrick Brothers, Hazey Janes and Southpaw, to name just four.

Finally, to get back to where it all began, it is the folk musicians in all parts of the British Isles who recognize their own tradition being fed back to them, filtered through three hundred years of American experience. American musicians in turn, enjoy returning to the source and exchanging ideas, and the results are invigorating for all. The Transatlantic Sessions, a sort of cross-traditional version of the "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" series, found a large audience, and a third CD is being recorded. What is refreshing, is that from the folk end to the rock end of the Americana spectrum, British musicians are finding themselves able to respect tradition, reproduce the sound they love, and yet write songs that spring from life in Britain today. Certainly, it's a great time to be a fan of this music.

By John Davy

(April 18, 2007)