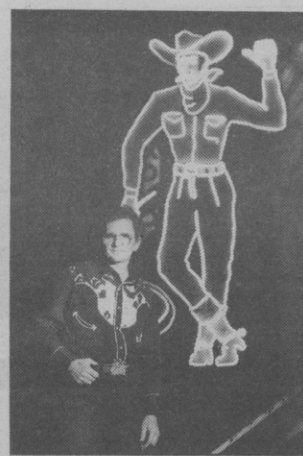


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'HUNTER' FROM PAGE 6

Hunter sees his songwriting is developing, he's learnt to tell a story and write hooklines. "Any song that's been successful has got a hookline, a line that sinks in, that people identify with." Some of his songs were written with other singers in mind — 'You've Still Got (that Look in Your Eyes)' for John Anderson, 'Evening Sun' for Eric Clapton, 'Gypsy Woman' for Don Williams.

There are three covers on the album, one of the most affecting being a country version of John Lennon's 'Jealous Guy.' "That's always been one of my favourites," says Hunter, "and I thought, it's such a great song, I can do it a different way, with a country feel." 'Honky Tonk Song' is an upbeat Webb Pierce tune Hunter found among some old jukebox 45s he was given. "I've done that since Hillman Hunter days. Then when Dwight Yoakam came out with 'Honky Tonk Man,' I thought, Shit! Who is this guy? Usurper!"

Merle Kilgour's 'When You Get on the Whisky (Let Someone Else Drive)' is a rocky number originally done by John Anderson. Hopefully it will be made into a video, and come out as the B-side of the first single, 'Highway Song.' Both tracks feature Dave Dobbyn on backing vocals and guitar.

Now, Al Hunter's getting another band together to support the album, a "few nights here and there, trying to get where the country music fans are. I don't know where that is, but I think it's towards the south and north of Auckland. We may even get to Gore!" It will be a big band, six or seven piece, "probably uneconomical," with pedal steel, fiddle, and piano.

The two keys to success are airplay and reaching the urban crowd. "I think the country audience will take care of itself, though the country music club people don't often get out to support stuff they're not involved in. Today at the Dolly Parton thing there'll be heaps of them, though."

In New Zealand, as in the United States, it's the schlocky end of country that wins mainstream support. "Maybe it's time for a change in New Zealand — I think we can just make people more aware that there's a relationship between country and rock and roll. But I think I'd go down well in Gore. I'm pretty adaptable, and have played at some major shows in front of a couple of thousand diehard country fans. The hardest part is to bring the music to

the people in the city." Hunter's Monday night residency at Auckland's Shakespeare tavern (augmented by Red McKelvie on steel and Cath Newhook on fiddle) attract a small but loyal crowd.

Honky Tonk Heroes

Four days before Dolly and Kenny visited town, the year's Grammy awards highlighted the country "schlock versus rock" problem. After dynamite performances from the year's country discoveries — Steve Earle, Randy Travis, Dwight Yoakam — the Judds just about choked when they opened the envelope for best country act. Old ham Ronnie Milsap had beat out the new traditionalists, with a syrupy rock and roll revival song.

"Yeah, having those three guys on that show was a big kick in the arse for country music in the States," says Hunter. "Three pure young players dedicated to bringing some soul back into the music. Dwight Yoakam stood on lots of peoples' toes when he first started talking about Nashville. He didn't make any friends down there," says Hunter. "Dwight's a bit of a revivalist, taking it back to the pure honky tonk sound which came out of the Bakersfield thing of Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Johnny Horton. Pure country with a rock feel. Rock and roll and country have always been so close; there's no difference between Jerry Lee Lewis playing a rockabilly song or a country song."

While Jim Reeves was once thrashed on New Zealand radio, and more recently, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard and George Jones, "the two finest singers in country music," have been ignored. "Then again," reasons Hunter, "a lot of people don't like the sound of George Jones' voice. He's what they call a singer's singer — anyone who's ever sung a song who hears George Jones sing has to be knocked out. The same with Merle Haggard."

"Nobody knows there was a Willie Nelson before *Stardust* now; unfortunately that was when he did his best material. When he first recorded, in 1962, they didn't like him, they thought he was weird because he sang differently from everyone else."

Lost in the schmaltz — and being revived by people like Ricky Scaggs — is the tradition of great instrumentalists in country music. "Listen to any of the classic country instrumentals, bluegrass, the western swing players, they're as good as any players in any form of music, they're just masters of their instrument, like Charlie Parker in jazz."

Hunter's been sharing his view of country music on Campus Radio for 18 months now (*Honky Tonk Heaven* airs each Sunday from 4pm till 6pm). "I love it. It gives me the chance to get it out to people who wouldn't normally hear it. It's the stuff we've been talking about — not the schmaltz, but the hard core stuff which has got poetry to it, it's lyrical, with well constructed songs and great playing. It's all there, it's soul music, white soul music."

"I've had people ring me up or come into the shop and say, 'Hell, I don't even like country music, but this stuff is great!'"

Chris Bourke

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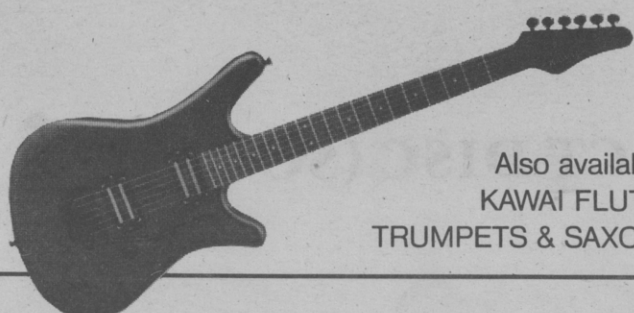
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