



Dwight Yoakam: country vrs Nashville pop.



Steve Earle: "Dwight eats sushi!"

The Men They Couldn't Hang Country's New Breed ● By Kerry Doole

Did you see the shoot-out at this year's Grammys? The three hottest young stars in country music had just performed the songs for which they'd been nominated for country record of the year.

The TV camera caught their tense, unsmiling faces as they awaited the verdict. And the winner? Ronnie Milsap, for *Lost in the 50s Tonight*. Talk about an anti-climax! What is the point of a three-way gunfight in which no one wins?

"Yep, it was pretty strange," says Steve Earle. "If they'd kept the camera on Dwight and I, it would have been classic. We sort of looked at each other and [rolls his eyes]. You have to remember that 70 percent of the Grammys' voters know nothing about country music, so they just ticked the most familiar name."

Such ignorance isn't going to last much longer. Steve Earle, Dwight Yoakam and Randy Travis are spearheading the single most exciting movement in American music right now, the revitalisation of country music. "New country," "new traditionalism," "hard country" — whatever peg you hang their hats on, there's no

denying this crucial trio and their peers are pumping young, virile blood into a form that had long lapsed into lethargy.

With some honourable exceptions, country music over the past 15 to 20 years had prostituted itself in its desire to cross over to a wider, pop-oriented audience. Desperately keen to shed its "hicks from the sticks" image, it dressed itself up in sequins and a slick, glossy sound.

Suburban Cowboys

Around the time of the *Urban Cowboy* fad, this formula did strike gold, but those raised on the real honky tonk music — you know, the stuff that'll have you crying in your beer or tearing a juke joint apart — were left wandering through a wasteland populated by just a few faithful flag-bearers.

Dwight Yoakam is an angry spokesman for the new breed: "That glossed-over pop that became part of the reality of Nashville in the 70s never had anything to do with country," he says. "They've aligned themselves with pop. When these kids come to our shows and say, 'We've never liked country music before,' we say, 'That's because you've never heard it!'"

In terms of record sales, the country music market in the 80s had been stagnating, even shrinking, but all observers agree that 1986 was

a watershed year. Country is becoming cool again, and this time it is because it is stressing true grit, not glitz.

Emmylou Harris, along with her now-legendary former partner Gram Parsons, deserves credit as an inspiration for the new artists. Ricky Scaggs, Rodney Crowell and Albert Lee all cut their chops in Harris's Hot Band of the 70s. In the early 80s, Scaggs and singers like John Anderson, George Strait and Reba McEntire have helped keep at least some country honest, and now they're being joined by a posse of young pretenders. Young?

"Country music is adult-oriented, so kids in country can be 30," says Nashville producer Tony Brown. "Because the cycle of change in country is so long, young artists stay stars, get older, gain weight and become uncool. So who wants to identify with those older country artists? Now young people can identify with country acts again."

"If Georgia Satellites and Bruce Springsteen think country is cool, the kids will too. Country artists are influencing rockers, who in turn are influencing the consumers." So while Kenny Rogers isn't hip, even LA punks love Dwight Yoakam.

Travesties

But based on records sold, Randy Travis has the draw on Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam. Get this for a statistic: Travis is the first country act ever to go platinum with a debut album within a year of its release.

While fly-by-nighters like the Beastie Boys get all the hype, this reserved 27-year-old from North Carolina has quietly sold more than a million copies of *Storms of Life*, plus truckloads of chart-topping country singles like 'Digging Up Bones,' 'One the Other Hand' and 'There's No Place Like Home.' His followup album *Always and Forever* has just been released.

Not too shabby for someone who little more than a year ago was still scrubbing catfish in between gigs at the Nashville Palace. But Travis is no novice. "I've been singing since I was eight," he says, "and been serious about it in a business sense since I was 17, when I entered a talent contest and won."

After a six year stint at a North Carolina country club, he moved to industry centre Nashville, Tennessee. Under the guise of Randy Ray, Traywick (his real name) put out a low budget LP for an indie label in 1983, but on signing to Warner Brothers he was advised to adopt the Travis name. He's taken the country world by storm, but Travis still seems bemused by his success. "It is hard to believe, especially on my first album," he says. "I'm very lucky, I guess."

Count Emmylou Harris as a fan: "For a while," she says, "you were wondering who was going to carry on these traditions, because most of the voices were pop-sounding. They lacked the edge that can take those country ballads and wrench every single bit of feeling and emotion from

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



In recognition of original New Zealand Rock Music

Last year's inaugural Rheineck Rock Music Award was a sensational success.

Ardijah proved to be worthy recipients with an album that's rating highly on the charts, and a sellout NZ tour.

This year, the Rheineck Rock Music Award offers the same breakthrough opportunity to another New Zealand Rock Group.

The Award consists of a \$30,000 grant to help towards the cost of recording an album, to be released under the guidance of the Award's Advisory Board. A similar sum will also go towards promoting a tour by the band to publicize their album.

It's a full-on opportunity. And, as last year, it's open to all New Zealand groups performing rock music. Preference will be given to those who already have a background of performing and recording.

This year's Rheineck Rock Music Award Judging Panel comprises Doug Hood, Colin Hogg and Judy Anaru.

It's THE rock opportunity of 1987. The Rheineck Rock Music Award. For full details and applications forms, write to:

Rheineck Rock Music Award,
PO Box 5779,
Wellesley Street, Auckland.



THE BEER'S CALLED RHEINECK