

them. Then along comes Randy and everyone goes, 'Where did he come from?' He has a wonderful voice in the Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings school."

Travis would sooner crawl across Death Valley in summer than cross over musically. "We don't give trying to cross over any thought at all. I don't care to sing anything but country music. That's all I'll ever sing or listen to!"

Top country songwriter Paul Overstreet wrote three songs on *Storms of Life*, and he sees Travis-style hard country versus "watered-down pop-country" as being akin to "100 percent cotton versus part polyester. Purer is better."

Guitar Man

Whereas Travis only occasionally records his own songs, Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam have earned their spurs as singer/songwriters.

It is Earle's songwriting that has attracted tags like "the Springsteen of new country," and many are predicting his rock and roll edge will make him the man the Springsteen and Mellancamp audience will take to heart.

Last year's debut album *Guitar Town* won him rock and country fans, even if it has yet to achieve the success of Travis and Yoakam. But his new album *Exit Zero* is just out, and it's expected to make more of an impact on AOR ra-

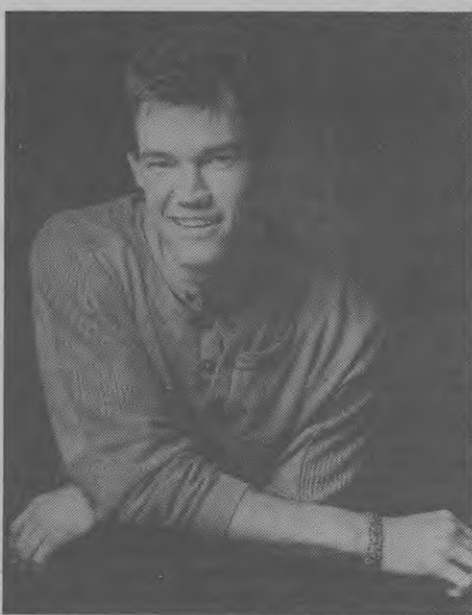
dio. "They'll have less problems with it," says Earle. "It is bigger-sounding, but I don't think the spirit is any different."

Of the trio, this 33-year-old Texan troubadour has the longest track record. As a young bohemian in the early 70s, he played with respected singer/songwriters Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, and Earle still sees himself "more as the last of that wave than a newcomer. I was the kid of that group, but I must have been passed out or drunk when they handed out the record deals!"

He survived, just, as a songwriter, hung out in Mexico, and put together a rockabilly trio in Nashville in 1982. "Rockabilly was something that had always appealed to me. My eccentric electric guitar style lent itself to that. I developed a lot of confidence as a performer then, and it did influence my guitar and vocal sounds."

Earle acknowledges the rise of new country, but insists that "it's an accident. Obviously Dwight, Randy and I weren't getting together and conspiring. We weren't even speaking! All three of us have brought a younger audience to country music with three completely different records. The fact the three of us exist disproves Dwight's theory that there's only one true form of country music."

The reference to "Dwight's theory" leads us into one of the most fascinating elements of new



Randy Travis: cotton vrs polyester.

traditionalism — an ideological debate about truth and purity that gets every bit as heated as political debate. Earle and Yoakam have a highly-developed awareness of their art and its historical roots, and they explain themselves eloquently.

Feudin' Cousins

Their differing approaches to country music flared into a personal feud that was only recently resolved: "It began at a show in San Francisco about a year ago," says Earle. "We played a good show, got an encore, then Dwight walked on. Three songs in, he says, 'These fuckers from Nashville don't know what they're doing, now we're going to show you the real thing.'"

"My crew had to lock me in the dressing room. I was going to kill the s.o.b! Then we started taking shots at each other in the press, and yes, I did write 'Dwight Yoakam eats sushi' in an elevator. But at the Grammys we decided it had gone too far. All three of us have realized we've changed more in country music in one year than it has changed in the last five or six."

Dwight now laughs off their rivalry. "Steve and I were unfairly and unjustly paired," he says. "There are certain comparisons. We're both new and doing things based in country, but Steve would be the first to say he's not doing traditional things with country. What he's doing is good music, and he has obviously shown it is important."

Earle: "What Dwight is all about is preserving a form of music, and that's great. What I'm all about is seeing how I can push the outside of the envelope to bring in new listeners. If you don't bring them in, the music dies, as the audience gets old and dies!"

Kentucky Reign

He wears his traditionalist tag as proudly as his ever-present cowboy hat, but Dwight Yoakam has a far wider, less traditional country audience than either Travis or Earle. You'll find Yoakam albums indexed between Wall of Voodoo, Hank Williams and X in his fans' collections. Attribute this to a background decidedly unconventional for a singer/songwriter who proclaims himself a "new generation West Coast honky tonker."

You see, this 30-year-old Kentuckian was rejected by the Nashville country music establishment as sounding "too country" a decade ago — a rebuff which still rankles. "They didn't want to hear about a Dwight Yoakam record even three years ago," he says.

Los Angeles beckoned. "One reason I moved west was the encouraging sign I saw from people like John Fogerty, Emmylou, and the Gram Parsons influence there. Fogerty's *Blue Ridge Rangers* LP in 1973 was closer to Hank Williams than anything coming out of Nashville."

After struggling around the honky tonk circuit, Dwight hooked into the bizarre LA cowpunk scene. "By 1983, the cowpunk movement had taken hold via bands like Rank and File, Lone Justice and Blood on the Saddle. When that crowd became a reality, we were able to play the rock clubs." In turn, the Husker Du and Violent Femmes fans dug his hard country sound, and they've stuck with him even though he's now reached the regular country crowd.

Yoakam's debut LP *Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc, Etc*, with its two hit singles 'Honky Tonk Man' and the title song, have gone gold, and he is confident his new album *Hillbilly Deluxe* will silence his detractors. "It should eliminate any questions in mind about us changing our style or deviating from what I said I'd do, which is to continue playing country music in as pure a fashion while still putting my personal fingerprint on it."

"All these people saying, 'It's a fad, he's riding on the coat-tails of a novelty, he wears suits with rhinestones and a hat, there's no substance' — we'll see in five years if I've run out of stuff then! People write off things that come from Hollywood as trendy, but that scene didn't create Los Lobos or myself. It embraced us."

Return to Sender

Sceptics find many reasons to distrust Yoakam — his LA years, good looks, that oft-displayed derriere, his eloquence, sharp dressing and sharp videos. If some image and marketing consultants concocted a blueprint of a new star to revitalise country music, they couldn't have done much better than design a Dwight Yoakam.

But have faith. Dwight is the real McCoy, a classic country artist of both sincerity and substance. He possesses a melodic, oft melancholy voice with an attractive quiver, and he writes hurtin' and honky tonk songs with the best of them: witness the new 'Johnson's Love,' about his parents' divorce, and 'Miner's Prayer,' a tribute to his coal-mining grandfather.

Yoakam's favourite phrase is "parameters of the art form." To him, "hillbilly/honky tonk music is an ethnic art form," and he dedicates himself to its preservation. But he denies he's a revivalist act. "I'm not trying to make albums that sound like they're recorded in 1954 in terms of sonics and fidelity. You don't have to throw the artistic baby out with the bath-water. To make country palatable to young people, don't short-sell it. We use modern recording and video techniques, but we maintain integrity of form."

"Both the country music industry and the artists over the last 20 years have shown a lack of respect for their own artform. People like Randy, Steve, and I hope myself, will be able by our track records to command a certain respect for the music."

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