

Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell were country stars, but now they're Americana. Robert Plant and Elvis Costello were British rockers, and now they're Americana. Mavis Staples was a gospel great, and Wanda Jackson was a rockabilly queen. These days they're Americana. Levon Helm used to play drums in rock 'n' roll's storied Band—as a solo artist, he's Americana. J.D. Souther was downright unclassifiable when he

took a break from his solo career in the 1980s. But when he returned to active duty in 2008 he was immediately tagged as Americana. "I'm not sure what that means," Souther admits.

He's not alone: Since the subgenre began to emerge as an identifiable commercial force in the mid-1990s, the definition of just what it is has been incessantly expanded outward. "Americana" can mean the thrashing rock of Drive-By Truckers or the polka sounds of LynnMarie Rink. It can mean bluesy Keb' Mo' and Susan Tedeschi, or English folk-rockers Mumford & Sons. It can mean singer-songwriters John Prine, Patty Griffin, Guy Clark and Todd Snider, or any number of other artists.



Alison Krauss and Robert Plant at Tennessee's Bonnaroo festival, 2008



Scott Avett at the 2010 Americana Honors & Awards, Nashville

"Against all odds, this is happening," says Jed Hilly, the executive director of the Nashville-based Americana Music Association. The 1,200-member organization, formed in 1999, puts on a yearly conference aimed at unifying those in the wide-reaching genre. "It's happening at a time in our business that's so hard. But people are catching on to this music. The difference in other music and Americana is the difference between commercial art and fine art. The beauty of this is that it's open. It makes sense if you listen to and appreciate the music."

'The music industry has consolidated but Americana has done the opposite.'
—Ed Jurdi, Band of Heathens

Yet few would deny that each of these artists has a place under the same umbrella. "I see the connection—there's an attitude or sensibility in each of these artists' musicality that is poetic in nature," says Crowell, who enjoyed a string of top mainstream country hits in the 1980s but watched the marketplace evolve away from him. "Production has supplanted performance in the mainstream. Americana is, for the most part, still focused on storytelling as performance art. Story and style trumps popularity as a motivating factor."

That doesn't mean Americana doesn't sell: Over the past decade, the genre has been home to some spectacular successes. The recently reissued *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, featuring core Americana artists like Emmylou Harris, Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss and others, sold more than 7.5 million copies in the U.S. and won an Album of the Year Grammy. Krauss and Plant's collaboration on *Raising Sand* landed five Grammys in 2009, including one in the newly created Folk/Americana category. And the current wave of popular artists being tagged with the label includes Mumford & Sons, the Avett Brothers, Amos Lee and this year's breakout duo the Civil Wars.



Emmylou Harris

RADIO DAYS

A fuller understanding of what Americana is can be found by asking what it isn't. We can start with nearly anything that lands on modern mainstream country radio—although many of the music's guiding lights were once reliable hitmakers in that very format. In the mid-'80s, Nashville ushered in what Steve Earle jokingly calls country music's "great credibility scare." After a pronounced swerve toward poppy sounds in the late 1970s, labels began snatching up artists whose roots in folk and traditional country were more pronounced. Rosanne Cash, Foster & Lloyd and other artists in that movement are now almost all associated with Americana music, although in some cases their basic sound hasn't changed a bit since they were sending hits up the country charts.

What happened? Plenty of things, beginning with the rise of Garth Brooks. The Oklahoman came to public attention in 1989, and quickly proved that country albums could sell in the tens of millions with a more crossover-friendly sound. There was also the FCC's Telecommunications Act of 1996 deregulating commercial

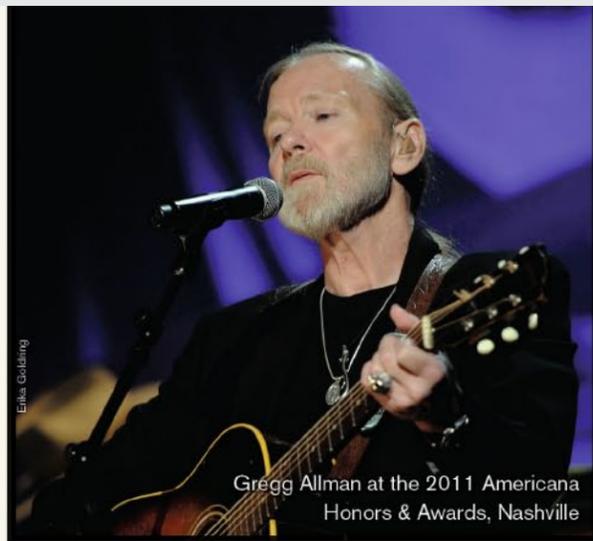


Mumford & Sons

'Americana is, for the most part, still focused on storytelling as performance art.'

—Rodney Crowell

radio, which meant that major corporations could own hundreds of stations—leading to much more risk-averse playlists. "What you heard on the radio became very different from what you heard in the '70s, when FM was loose and free," Souther says. Many of country's more esoteric acts were swept off the airwaves, though they'd already established enough fans to assure them loyal audiences well through the turn of the millennium.



Gregg Allman at the 2011 Americana Honors & Awards, Nashville

The emerging split between mainstream country and Americana left many choosing camps, pointing toward the latter as a corrective to an alleged lack of substance in the former. Singer and songwriter Elizabeth Cook, groomed as a mainstream country artist in the early 2000s, but rejected by radio for excessive twang, says such concerns are now irrelevant. "Who cares?" she asks. "Let's shut up and make great, undeniable, visceral music that helps and moves people. Let's stop whining about who screwed who and all the stuff that 'just ain't right.' It's past tense and a giant waste of energy. Real artists doing their work should have no time for it."

AN ANTIDEPRESSANT

While country radio was losing interest in those implicated in Earle's "great credibility scare," emerging acts in the underground were generating buzz—and efforts continued to find a suitable rubric. In the early 1990s, edgy artists like Jason & the Scorchers began to be labeled "alternative country" (or the snappier "alt-country"). When *No Depression* magazine began publishing in 1995, covering a range of rootsy sounds, the name of the publication began to be applied to the genre. The publication was itself named for an ancient Carter Family song covered by then-current band Uncle Tupelo—creating a suitable connection between past and present.

But in the mid-1990s, trade publication *Gavin* began publishing an "Americana" chart, figuring the word to be a good catchall description that suited everyone from country-rooted rock bands such as the Bottle Rockets, Son Volt and Wilco, and



Carolina Chocolate Drops

THE NEXT GENERATION

SARAH JAROSZ

Jarosz was a precocious mandolin talent, a virtuoso by age 10 who was holding her own onstage with Ricky Skaggs and David Grisman at age 12. But what's most impressive about Jarosz, now 20, is her development as a vocalist and songwriter. Her sophomore album, 2011's *Follow Me Down*, features nine of her own compositions, along with covers of Bob Dylan's "Ring Them Bells" and Radiohead's "The Tourist."

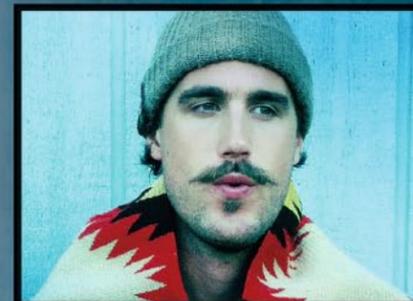


THE CIVIL WARS

Joy Williams and John Paul White earned Country Music Association and CMT Awards consideration in 2011 for their *Barton Hollow* album, though their minimalist, haunting music is far from the busy fare that dominates contemporary country playlists. "We've been smiling the entire year," White says. "We know what we're in the middle of and how fortunate we are."

CAITLIN ROSE

Rose, 24, is the daughter of hit country songwriter (and frequent Taylor Swift collaborator) Liz Rose. Her *Own Side Now* album has in particular helped her gain a foothold in Europe; she often tours there, and has been sharing U.S. bills with the Decemberists, Justin Townes Earle and others. "In England I have old men showing up with roses," she says. "Here it's college boys saying, 'I usually hate opening acts, but you were all right.'"



RAYLAND BAXTER

Rayland Baxter, the son of veteran multi-instrumentalist Bucky Baxter, sings in a strong and expressive voice and writes like a more focused Ryan Adams. He's a 6'5", fly-fishing song-poet, and in 2010 released a timeless-sounding EP, *The Miscalculation of Song*. Expect a full-length album debut in early 2012 from this precocious talent, who has collaborated with Rose and played shows with the Civil Wars and Jarosz.

THE SECRET SISTERS

O Brother, Where Art Thou? soundtrack architect T Bone Burnett recently took the Secret Sisters, the Alabama-reared duo of Laura and Lydia Rogers, under his wing. The blend of harmony and simplicity on their self-titled debut harkens back to the Louvin Brothers and the Andrews Sisters. Among their ardent fans are Jack White, who produced a Secret Sisters single (a cover of Johnny Cash's "Big River"), and Paul Simon, who is touring with the duo this fall.



veteran singer-songwriters such as Townes Van Zandt, Prine and Guy Clark. "We hammered away at this 'Americana' thing from the very beginning," recalls John Jeter, talent buyer for Greenville, S.C., venue the Handlebar. "I'd tell folks, 'Americana? Yeah, it's rock you can understand the words to, and country without the pop.'"

With the emergence of the Americana Music Association, the terminology was set in stone. "The roots of where it came from binds it," says Jim Lauderdale, the Grammy-winning singer-songwriter who regularly hosts the Association's annual Honors and Awards ceremony. "Even in seemingly different styles, whether they're acoustic or more rock-influenced, there are elements that go back to the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. You can hear that in everything."

For his part, Lauderdale says he's grown comfortable with having the Americana term affixed to him. "When somebody hears something they like a lot, they get curious and find out about other bands and artists that their new favorites enjoy," says the singer, who contributes harmony vocals and guitar in Costello's acoustic group, the Sugarcanes. The sheer amount of collaboration among artists in the Americana community helps to aid that process—just check out the Wikipedia page devoted to Emmylou Harris' work with other artists, which is spread across four enormous sections organized alphabetically.

BROAD TASTES

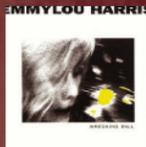
Then again, what's in a name anyway? Or, more important, a chart categorization, record-store bin or radio format? "I haven't heard anyone say they like what we do because it's on a chart or because it fits into a genre," says Joy Williams of the Civil Wars, the Nashville duo that recently saw its debut, *Barton Hollow*, reach No. 12 on the all-genre Billboard Top 200. "What we hear, thankfully, is that they just enjoy what they're hearing. We take special pleasure that people with all kinds of musical preferences come to the shows."

ESSENTIAL AMERICANA



NITTY GRITTY DIRT BAND
WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN

This 1972 classic was released well before country and folk-rooted music was grouped as Americana, but nonetheless embodies the sound and spirit of the music. The Dirt Band brought in country and bluegrass legends including Earl Scruggs, Roy Acuff and Mother Maybelle Carter for this double-album set, which included covers of country classics from Hank Williams and Merle Travis alongside Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now."



EMMYLOU HARRIS
WRECKING BALL

One of the major milestones on the way to Americana's acceptance as a genre unto itself was the 1995 release of Harris' *Wrecking Ball*. Produced by Daniel Lanois (best known for his work with U2 and Peter Gabriel), the album was neither country nor pop, neither retro nor futuristic. But it was a critical success, and a beacon to many musicians who worked in the hard-to-categorize roots-music terrains. By ignoring the charts and following her heart, Harris became the godmother of what's now called "Americana."



LUCINDA WILLIAMS
CAR WHEELS ON A GRAVEL ROAD

Williams reached a mainstream audience with this 1998 effort that earned a Best Contemporary Folk Album Grammy. With Lauderdale and Harris contributing ethereal harmonies, Williams' songs and sound recalled the Band and Carter Family yet remained specific and idiosyncratic. "Drunken Angel," her elegy for songwriter Blaze Foley, is a heartbreaking highlight.



O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?
SOUNDTRACK

Somehow this collection of country, folk, bluegrass and blues songs, featuring recordings by underexposed artists including Ralph Stanley, the Cox Family and the Fairfield Four, emerged as a commercial blockbuster that won the 2001 Album of the Year Grammy. Producer T Bone Burnett brought the music and musicians together for a soundtrack whose acclaim and popularity eclipsed those of the movie.



ROBERT PLANT, ALISON KRAUSS
RAISING SAND

Burnett also helmed this Album of the Year Grammy winner, a left-field surprise for fans who figured Plant's skill set was limited to the tools of a howling rock frontman. Together Plant and Krauss delved into the soul of Americana, covering the Everly Brothers, Townes Van Zandt and Doc Watson, as well as Rowland Salley's then-overlooked masterpiece, "Killing the Blues."

Given the unprecedented accessibility of music online, listeners are crossing genre boundaries more easily these days. "People don't have strict parameters for the music they listen to," says Ed Jurdi of Texas-based Band of Heathens. "When I look through people's record collections, I'll see Billie Holiday, Dawes, Muddy Waters and Hank Williams. And now with [online streaming] services like Spotify, people have almost unlimited access to thousands of records. It's mind-bending. So much of the music industry has become more consolidated, but Americana has done the opposite."

What Americana has not done is establish itself as a commercial radio format. Satellite radio features some on its Outlaw Country station, but there's no dedicated Americana channel. And while stations that program the music have seen some success (most notably KPIG in the Santa Cruz, Ca., area and WSM-AM in Nashville), there's been no profit-driven rush to the format. There's also no Billboard chart for Americana, and on iTunes it is relegated to a subgenre of country.



"My battles now are with retailers and online distributors," Hilly says. "If the people in the music business would give this a home, they would see dollars." His task is a big one: to classify what is in some ways unclassifiable, and to build a community of artists who are broadly diverse and highly individual by nature. He's also seeking to grow a long-haul genre in a rocket-ride music world—but then again, the long haul can be an appealing journey. Younger Americana artists watch Harris, Prine and so many others playing auditoriums at ages most mainstream country acts would be kicking around county fairs and see value in careers that aren't defined by big hits. "We want to stair-step, ever so slightly," says the Civil Wars' John Paul White. "A friend told us once that the way you ascend is the way you descend, so we want a long, slow arc."

The rise of Americana itself has been of the stair-step variety, but its presence, influence and notoriety are now at a higher level than ever. "It's sincere artists slogging along, making good music for those who not only want to hear it but are willing to track it down," Crowell says. He draws a parallel to the musical hotbed of the 1950s, when country, rock and blues first began to mix—and wound up producing a generation of pioneers. "Need I mention that the likes of Elvis, Chuck Berry, Howlin' Wolf, Lightnin' Hopkins, Rosetta Tharpe and Miles Davis were just starting to come into their own just about then?" he says. "Keep your fingers crossed." **M**

MASTODON | VINCE GILL | MUTEMATH | TORI AMOS | JOHN HIATT



LINDSEY BUCKINGHAM
Fleetwood Mac and me

EVANESCENCE
Returning to life

ALICE COOPER
The horror

CHICKENFOOT

Sammy Hagar, Joe Satriani, Michael Anthony and Chad Smith Throw Down the Gauntlet

WHAT IS AMERICANA?
IN THE STUDIO
DAW DREAMS

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