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The music scene in Austin Texas during the 1970s was a rapidly growing and complex musical environment. The city’s rural aesthetic attracted many country music artists wishing to get away from the demanding commercialism of major record labels. At the same time, Austin’s University of Texas student population was rapidly expanding, providing the city with a young, liberal-minded audience eager to participate in and contribute to Austin’s musical growth and development. As such, artists and audiences alike searched for a distinctly Texan identity, holding true to traditional country music roots while running counter to the conservative views previously associated with country music genres. Travis Stimeling uses first hand interviews, print sources, and source recordings to shed light on the complex, and often contradictory, countercultural movement known as progressive country music. Stimeling’s Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks provides a concise yet well-rounded and analytical overview of the forces that created and shaped progressive country music during the 1970s. Stimeling does not offer a groundbreaking new take on the progressive country scene, nor does he focus on the influence of a single factor such as radio, live performance, or studio recordings. He instead creates a unified overview that illustrates the part that all parties and forces involved played in shaping progressive country music.

Stimeling is careful in selecting specific and poignant examples to illustrate his points. Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks is organized into an introductory chapter, five main body chapters, and a conclusion. The organization of the book is methodical and Stimeling makes sure to include
much needed background information in the introduction, taking the time to define and explain how country music could be viewed as progressive. Stimeling points out that at the beginning of the 1970s the general public viewed country music as anything but progressive and “in comparison to the modern synthesizer banks, extended improvisations, and fantasy-laced lyrics of contemporaneous ‘progressive rock’ music, country music’s ‘down-home’ lyrical tropes, compact song forms, and string band instrumentation sounded remarkably regressive.”¹ Yet many artists of the 60s and 70s situated along America’s Sunbelt embraced the traditional musical practices of country music and fused them with modern rock and jazz forms, thus allowing them to express their liberal ideas while feeling connected to a simpler, pre-modern American heritage.²

In the first chapter of the book Stimeling focuses on progressive country as it developed locally within Austin. He highlights the influence of Kenneth Threadgill, owner of Threadgill’s Tavern. Younger musicians would frequent Threadgill’s in order to learn the intricacies of traditional instrumentation and execution from experienced practitioners of the traditional country music idiom. According to Stimeling, “Kenneth Threadgill personified the ideals of the progressive country music scene in Austin. By creating a safe space for the city’s emerging counterculture in the early 1960s, Threadgill served as the patriarch of its music scene”³

Stimeling also emphasizes the importance of the only large concert venue in Austin, the Armadillo World Headquarters. Formerly a National Guard armoury, the Armadillo became the main stage for local bands to perform for larger audiences in a more open setting than that of Threadgille’s Tavern. The local radio station KOKE-FM had a direct line from the Armadillo to their radio station so as to allow the live broadcast of concerts.

Continuing through chapter one, Stimeling segues nicely into a discussion of the importance and influence of Austin’s KOKE-FM radio station. In 1972, the station revamped and reworked its programming in order to shift away from the block programming of specific genres such as jazz, top 40 pop hits, and rock n roll. KOKE-FM aimed their new programming at the local audience and featured progressive country music almost exclusively. The term “progressive country”

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² Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys*, 3.

³ Ibid., 24.
was even coined by KOKE-FM program director, Rusty Bell. Stimeling’s assertions regarding the influence of KOKE-FM on the identification and promotion of progressive country music are echoed in Kim Simpson’s article “Country Radio’s Growing Pains in the Music Trades,” however, Simpson points out that KOKE-FM was never able to hold a sizeable percentage of Austin’s overall listener base. According to Simpson, KOKE-FM struggled to retain ratings and listenership throughout the 70s and, while influential within the progressive country scene, was not able to bring progressive country into the mainstream. Stimeling does not mention this and instead gives the impression that KOKE-FM was generally a major player in all of Austin’s radio and not just within progressive country circles. This can mislead the reader, giving the sense that progressive country music was listened to by the majority of Austin’s population when, after reading Simpson’s article, one can conclude that progressive country was not the only music going on at the time. It is here that more information regarding how the popularity of progressive country music compared to other genres in terms of radio listenership may have benefitted Stimeling’s discussions and helped paint a clearer picture of progressive country’s place in Austin’s music scene.

Moving on from the discussion of Austin’s radio and live performance venues, Stimeling introduces the Cosmic Cowboy saying, “these young people, the majority of whom congregated in and around Austin, often wore their hair long and smoked marijuana like ‘hippies,’ but dressed in the faded blue jeans, work shirts, cowboy hats, and boots of the rural cowboy.” In this chapter Stimeling builds on Michael Allen’s article “I Just Wanna Be a Cosmic Cowboy.” Whereas Allen offers a look at the conflicting imagery of the merging of cowboy and hippie culture within music, movies, and literature, Stimeling focuses solely on the merging of these cultures through their music.

Both Stimeling and Allen point out that the term “cosmic cowboy” came about because of a song by the same name by Michael Martin Murphy. Murphy’s Cosmic Cowboy became an anthem for lovers of progressive country, and according to Allen it “fused counterculture and cowboy culture.” Stimeling adds a sense of irony to Allen’s sentiments by pointing out that Murphy never

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4 Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys, 29.


6 Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys, 42.

intended for anyone to take the song seriously. “By Murphey’s estimation, therefore, progressive country fans had fundamentally misinterpreted the message of ‘Cosmic Cowboy,’ hearing the song not as a satire of the emerging ‘back to the land’ movement but instead as a literal celebration of Austin, Texas, and the American West.”

Was progressive country’s “cosmic cowboy” created because a few hippies simply missed the point? He never states this outright, and Stimeling may wish to clarify his argument here as the reader is given the impression that many of progressive country’s fans were somewhat uninformed blind followers, looking for any cause to attach themselves to.

Stimeling also points out that intellectuals of the time were in fact aware of the Cosmic Cowboy counterculture and its often-conflicting stances. In the early 1970s University of Texas professor Joe Kruppa delivered a speech to the campus’s student union that came down against the Cosmic Cowboy counterculture. Kruppa identifies the people associated with progressive country music as “new hicks.” Kruppa goes on to say that “New Hicks should not be confused with Rednecks who don’t know any better. New Hicks would like to be Rednecks who don’t know any better, but they’re having a hard time pulling it off.” As such, Stimeling is able to show that contemporaries of 1970s Austin were astutely aware of what was going on and, regardless of their opinions of the counterculture, those contemporaries at least identified the conflicts and ironies within the image of the Cosmic Cowboy. The 1977 article “Cowboy Without a Cause” by Marian J. Morton and William P. Conway further enforces Stimeling’s point by illustrating a contemporary awareness of the conflicts inherent within the merging of cowboy and popular culture.

In the next chapter, Stimeling continues to explore the contradictory nature of the cosmic cowboy image. According to Stimeling, acting and dressing as cowboys caused participants of Austin’s progressive country music scene to act like the caricatures of rednecks portrayed in many progressive country songs creating an “ironic stance toward the redneck.” This in turn caused them “to act in ways that ran counter to the stated social and political goals of the leaders of the scene.” While Stimeling does a wonderful job of explaining the effect that the cowboy image had on progressive country listeners and performers, an

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8 Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys, 60.


10 Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys, 74.

11 Ibid.
explanation of why the cowboy image had such an effect is lacking. What was it about cowboy hats and boots that led proponents of the progressive country scene to adopt the image of the culture they were supposedly running counter to? Jeffrey T. Manuel goes into greater depth on this issue in his article *Plain White Folk: Creating Country Music's Social Origins*. Here, Manuel credits intellectuals, folklorists, anthropologists, and historians with creating the strong race and gender exclusive image associated with country music. This suggests that cosmic cowboys may have disagreed with conservative redneck politics, while simultaneously attaching themselves to the powerful and masculine image associated with cowboy culture in order to legitimize the progressive country movement in the eyes of the average Texan. As further proof of this, Richard A. Peterson and Paul Di Maggio, writing in 1975 observed that within country music circles “old patterns of cultural diversity along ethnic, regional, and even class lines [were] being destroyed or buried.” The imagery and culture surrounding country music became accessible to more people regardless of political orientation or class.

The next two chapters of Stimeling’s book are very closely linked to each other. They examine the overarching need for progressive country music to be perceived as authentic. Chapter four examines the push toward an authentic sound through live recordings and highlights the attempts of artists such as Jerry Jeff Walker to produce a live sound in a studio setting. Chapter five further explores the push for authenticity through the mimicking and revival of older styles of traditional country music. Stimeling suggests that there was a longing for a connection to a more rural Texan past illustrated by the revival of the western swing sound developed by Bob Wills in the 1930s. Wills employed old, competition-style fiddle practices and merged them with the big band jazz sounds of the 1930s and 1940s. Bands of the 1970s such as Asleep at the Wheel and Alvin Crow latched on to this practice and closely studied the recordings of Wills in order to assert themselves as authentic bearers of a Texan musical tradition.

The final chapter of the book focuses on the culture surrounding music festivals in and around Austin. Stimeling emphasizes the influence of Willie Nelson and his Fourth of July Picnic Festivals held throughout the early 1970s. Stimeling also points out the resistance that many of the festivals met with from nearby towns concerned with the influx of counterculture youths that

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accompanied any large concert featuring progressive country acts. While Stimeling eloquently describes and explains the influence that these large music festivals had on the image of the cosmic cowboy, this final chapter, entitled “Conclusion” does not seem to offer any concrete closing statements. The ending of this chapter leaves the reader with a feeling that the book is unfinished and even a brief overview of the arguments presented throughout the book would have helped solidify the wealth of information that Stimeling presents.

Overall, Stimeling delivers an exciting, well-researched, and informative account of the progressive music scene in Austin during the 1970s. He intended to provide an overview of all the factors that contributed to the development of the progressive country music scene and largely succeeded in doing so. He touches on a great number of points and it would be almost impossible for him to go into depth with all of them. For example, Stimeling neglects a detailed description of the structure of country songs, generally referring to country music as having a “compact song form”.14 As such, Stimeling’s book can be supplemented with further reading, such as Jocelyn R. Neal’s Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music, which details the specific song forms of country music and how they have contributed to making country such an identifiable genre.15

Stimeling’s writing is pointed yet entertaining and his use of direct quotes from interviews, presented in the vernacular in which they were delivered, gives the reader a feeling of being present at the interview, however, there are times when the broken sentences and identifiably “southern” speech patterns of the interviewees make it difficult to understand the exact points being made.

The language of the book is also geared towards a more general audience as Stimeling takes care to explain musical terms in a clear deliberate way. One such example is his description of swung eighth notes as being “a rhythmic practice in which the first subdivision of the beat is played slightly longer than the second.”16 This makes the book more accessible and easier to comprehend even for those who are already musically literate. Stimeling does not put his book strictly in the realm of academia; instead, his clear prose makes the book a joy to read and includes the reader in the academic conversation.

Stimeling’s use of specific musical examples throughout the book helps to solidify many of his points, however, describing music is never the same as

14 Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys, 3.


16 Stimeling, Cosmic Cowboys, 96.
listening to it and at times Stimeling’s points are lessened if the reader has not listened to the song being examined. Stimeling attempts to remedy this by providing an extensive discography. Readers should take advantage of this, as listening to the music examined in the book is paramount to a full understanding of the concepts and principles presented. It is important to note that the added accessibility to music of all kinds, provided by the current state of technology and the internet, allows current consumers of musicological texts to further understand the points made by contemporary scholars. Stimeling has clearly recognized this and has thus oriented his approach towards the examination of the 1970s progressive country counterculture in a way that attracts and encourages the general public to enter into the conversation as well.

In conclusion, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks* is a beautifully written book that encompasses an astounding wealth of information in a relatively compact form. The clarity of writing allows anyone to follow Stimeling’s arguments and no prior knowledge on the subject is required. Readers must take advantage of the provided discography and listen to the music discussed or many of the book’s arguments are lost, however, Stimeling conveys a passion for this music that makes listening to the musical examples presented in the book an enjoyable process for anyone, regardless of their musical preferences. The book falls short of being an absolute authority on the subject of progressive country music but succeeds in providing an exceedingly in-depth introduction to the progressive country scene in Austin during the 1970s. In this sense, the book does exactly what it intends to do and is a must-read for anyone interested in country music.

**For Further Reading**


