

Review

Toby Martin. 2015. *Yodelling Boundary Riders: Country Music in Australia since the 1920s*. Melbourne: Lyrebird Press. ISBN 9780734037787 (pbk). 178 pp.

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Yodelling Boundary Riders traces the seldom-told origin of Australian country music. Toby Martin explores an important and enduring genre of popular music culture that continues to thrive to this day, from its frequently glamorous and youthful hillbilly beginnings to the contemporary modern-yet-rural country music of twenty-first-century Australia.

Martin's book contextualizes Australian country music into a broader story of Australian literary and cultural history. From the romantic heroism and triumph over the loneliness brought on by the vast open landscapes of rural Australia (celebrated by Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson), these frequently pastoral tales set to music have an authentic and justified origin in rural Australia, retained in much the same way by the singers and songs of the American hillbilly tradition. In the 1930s, artists such as Tex Morton came to embody a conflated, romantic and transitory image of the American cowboy and the Australian stockman or boundary rider.

An accessible read, Martin's text is full of colourful and entertaining characters that will be familiar to many readers, such as Chad Morgan and Slim Dusty and those arguably lesser-known in the public domain such as Tex Morton and the McKean sisters. His text is alive with the exploits of cowboys, stockmen, itinerant travellers and singing cowgirls and simultaneously documents a broader history of Australian country music, from its hillbilly beginnings to its rebirth as country music after rock'n'roll supplanted hillbilly music as the dominant youth-oriented music in the 1970s.

Martin begins by situating the reader at a Slim Dusty 'variety show', as opposed to a concert. Here, Dusty's show features several acts interspersed with his storytelling and performance. This show encapsulates much of the broader scope of Martin's book: featuring characters and events central to the Australian performance of hillbilly and country music, with Dusty's show comprising tales of the

rodeo circuit, his love of 1920s American hillbilly acts such as Jimmie Rodgers and Dusty's wife, singer and songwriter Joy McKean, performing with her sister, Heather, reprising their 1940s singing cowgirl act The McKean Sisters. The Slim Dusty show, as Martin observes, presents a key component of country music, that of a nostalgia for the past, a tradition that, the author observes much later in the book, remains celebrated, adapted and preserved in the form of the bush ballad in the modern era at the Tamworth Country Music Festival.

One of Martin's most compelling points is his analysis and exploration of authenticity—an inherent part of country music—and how the unspoken understanding that the singer has, in some way, led the life explored in the lyrics being performed or recorded. Martin discusses a twentieth-century preoccupation with authenticity, arising from what he describes as a simultaneous anxiety and dissatisfaction with modern life, resulting in the idea that 'country music in Australia regarded city life as inauthentic and corrupting, and rural life as virtuous and pure' (8).

Another of Martin's talents has been to dissect what he calls the paradox of the history of country music in Australia: how early purveyors of the form, such as Tex Morton, applied the lives and experiences of the Australian stockman and associated outback landscapes to the form of the American hillbilly style (the rock'n'roll of its day) while retaining the sentimentality and nostalgic yearnings for family and place. What lingers after reading *Yodelling Boundary Riders* is how a seemingly wholly transported musical style is in fact an organic natural expression of Australian identity that Martin examines through a clear and broad lens.