

Ranch Boys and Peach Pickers

With bales of hay, lingering odours and homemade wine on the sly out back, barns in rural Niagara of the 1940s and 50s hosted Saturday night 'jamborees', with round and square dancing to music even then called 'oldtime'.

Prominent local bands drew the crowds, first among them fiddler Abbie Andrews and His Canadian Ranch Boys, featuring the McMullen Brothers on vocals and guitars (and, later on, a teenage accordionist named Walter Ostanek). Early 50s fans packed regional community halls and fairgrounds for shows by the Lincoln County Peach Pickers -- the duo of harmony-singing guitarists Eric Goerz and Johnny Harder, augmented by 'Cousin' John Goertzen on mandolin and 'mouth organ'.

Back then, both bands were also heard live on radio, several times weekly over local stations and Dominion-wide on Saturday night 'remote' broadcasts. From the stage, they sold autographed photos and the 78 rpm records both had out, including their 'hits': the Ranch Boys' version of Abbie Andrews' original "Lord Alexander's Reel" (on the Biltmor label) and the Peach Pickers' song, "Niagara Moon", words and music by Eric Goerz, released on Niagara).

The Ranch Boys and the Peach Pickers were significant players in the formative years of Canadian country music when, by medium of live radio, it enjoyed a height of popularity. As heard from emeritus Ranch Boy Bob McMullen and as told by all three Peach Pickers, the stories of their careers tell a complementary tale. They reveal how local practices and particulars of our 'grape country' music scene engaged and reflected the wider realm of 'country and western' in Canada as it evolved from diverse roots and absorbed modern influences.

Theirs was a time when the term 'country and western' itself was newly-minted. (In 1949, the music industry trade magazine *Billboard*, belatedly aware of offensive language, renamed its 'hillbilly' chart 'country and western'; its 'race' chart 'rhythm and blues'.) Their music records a local specific take on an emerging genre of popular music in an era when, even down in the States, Nashville's idiom was not yet the dominant brand in c&w.

Terminology is problematic here, just as names are highly resonant. Andrews et al, with his fiddle prominent, played a repertoire akin, in part, to famous contemporary, Don Messer: jigs, reels, schottisches and Celtic fiddle tunes -- pure 'oldtime'. But the McMullens also harmonized on songs from a 'western' tradition wherein folkloric 'cowboy' meets 'swing' and even 1930s 'pop' -- think Sons of the Pioneers, Bob Wills and Gene Autry. The Boys' frequent guest 'girl-singers', Billie Allen and Grace Powell,

favoured the Patsys, Cline and Montana. On record, Tom McMullen follows a banjo solo with one on his brand-new Stratocaster electric guitar.

The elements in an emerging 'modern' definition of country music had yet to fuse into a more narrow mix and rigid fix of conventions. In the Ranch Boys' sound, no less than in their cowboy 'get-ups' -- Stetsons to tooled-leather boots -- 'western' was more than a tag end to a phrase. Local variations on widely-borrowed themes, they were an innovatively Canadian 'outfit', with Niagara as stand-in for the range.

"We picked peaches before we picked guitars," says Eric Goerz, laughing. With high close harmonies, acoustic guitars and mandolin solos, these Lincoln County pickers played what listeners today would recognize as 'bluegrass' -- think Flatt & Scruggs, Bill Munroe, back to the Carter Family. Think also of lesser-known artists the Peach Pickers unabashedly copied -- especially the stars of WWVA, Wheeling, West Virginia: Doc Williams and the Bailey Brothers (for whom the young Pickers performed as opening act at a Beamsville fair).

They didn't call their music 'bluegrass' -- that label had yet to stick. The group's promos of the time named their music 'folk'. Johnny Harder suggests 'mountain' as apt description, with Smokeys and Ozarks in mind, maybe with the escarpment as proxy. They even called it 'western', Goerz admits, "in our ignorance." Despite explicit locality of name and southern locale of sources, the Lincoln County Peach Pickers also donned cowboy regalia in performance and publicity photos. Clearly this *de rigueur* fashion statement of country music was already in place (and it persists, as perhaps the last vestige of 'western' in contemporary 'country').

The Boys and the Pickers further compare and contrast in telling ways. Most grew up on farms near such towns as Niagara-on-the-Lake, Beamsville, and Queenston; Andrews was St Catharines born and raised. Many had urban 'day-jobs', notably at McKinnons. They acquired their specific styles, in large part, indirectly -- over radio, the medium through which both later found national audiences.

Andrews and the Ranch Boys were a dance band, hiring callers when needed, playing a wide variety of instrumentals, suited to the steps. They performed skits -- one featuring giant wrestler Sky Hi Lee, feigning displeasure that his singer wife, Billie Allen, was not getting her share of the spotlight; there was comic patter between songs.

The Peach Pickers emphasized vocals and usually played to seated audiences in halls and high school auditoriums. Befitting their Mennonite upbringing and like practice of their mentors, they often sang gospel tunes, dedicating hymns to shut-ins on their radio shows. Early on, they won a talent contest, first prize was a gig in a Toronto bar, which they declined. Both groups appealed to all ages, though the Pickers, pre-Elvis, had a teenage fan club with hundreds of members.

Family ties and local 'roots' shaped both bands. The Ranch Boys' origins lie in an earlier

group led by the McMullen Brothers' father, George, a fiddler, who came here from Belfast, Ireland in 1915. By the 1930s George was playing his very 'oldtime', Celtic-flavoured music Friday nights on CKTB. The adolescent Bob McMullen learned to play by furtively 'borrowing' his older sister's guitar and joined the family show, with two sisters and brother, in 1937. Abbie Andrews, then all of fourteen, came along when McMullen senior retired.

Andrews, who at eleven began lessons on classical violin, connected with 'oldtime' in the person of Alec House, an 80 year old customer on his paper route who in summertime sat out on his porch and played fiddle tunes. Young Abbie listened and was enthralled; he soon was 'sitting in', learning the tradition he would later contribute to.

Beamsville-born Goerz and Pickers partner Harder met as schoolboys near Niagara-on-the-Lake when Harder moved from Winnipeg. Beyond group music lessons at school, a mutual interest in 'folk' music, inspired by radio broadcasts, spurred their learning to play guitar. In after-chores sessions, they ignored set lessons, preferring to mimic, note for note, likes of the Louvin and Stanley Brothers. Meanwhile, 'Cousin' Goertzen, then in Kitchener, was, in similar fashion, teaching himself mandolin and harmonica. They did, in the process, learn musical notation, a necessary skill for composers in those days before tape recorders.

Live radio shows launched and sustained both careers. The Ranch Boys succeeded McMullen senior and another local group, the Barnstormers, on CKTB, St Catharines, and in various incarnations and time-slots played weekly for some sixteen years to follow. Early days had them as the 'Tennessee Hillbillies' on a Saturday afternoon show featuring race results from Fort Erie. Bob McMullen, who for a time was chauffeur to station-owner E.T. Sandell (also owner of Taylor and Bate Brewery -- hence the call-letters 'TB'), recalls a Monday evening slot and how, at another time, their shows used to sign on the Yates Street station at 6:00 a.m. They opened with a theme song, fittingly about cowboys and coffee ("I wanna drink my java from an old tin can") and closed with a travelling song ("Highways are happy ways/When they lead always to home"). For thirty minutes of fiddle tunes and harmonizing, typical pay was \$5 each per show.

Summers, early 50s Saturday nights, Andrews' band played the Embassy Hotel in Port Dalhousie, broadcasting over telephone lines on a trans-Canada network, opposite Messer's Islanders on the CBC. This meant double wages and much wider audience. McMullen tells of a co-worker's joking complaint that even visiting his hometown out west, he couldn't escape the Ranch Boys.

In 1952, The Peach Pickers auditioned for CHVC, Niagara Falls, winning a spot, with proviso they find their own sponsors, a task undertaken by manager J.R. Angleman. Angleman ran a music store and played in concert and military brass bands. An enthusiast of all things royal, styling himself betimes as "Sir James", Angleman rented the boys rehearsal space at the Prince of Wales Hotel. By late '52, the trio was regularly

expanded to include Frank 'One Note' Shuttler from Hamilton on bass and Thorold's John Groat on fiddle.

CHVC boasted 5000 watts, with studios three floors up in a building under the Rainbow Bridge, to which the band climbed, performing twice a week a well-rehearsed programme, precisely timed to include commercials and avoid the cardinal sin of live radio: 'dead air'. Their opening theme was "Foggy Mountain Top"; they closed with 'Way Down Yonder'. Goerz extols the discipline gained here, the aplomb to deal with surprise absences by announcers in the other booth at close of a set. This professionalism stood them well when, soon, they joined the bigger time: "Main Street Jamboree" on Hamilton's CHML.

This Saturday night radio show, hosted by Gordie Tapp (in his alter-ego, 'Gaylord'), featured segments by visiting stars and several regular artists, including St Catharines-born Jack Kingston. They broadcast 'remotes' each week from high school auditoriums all over southern Ontario, with a portion of the evening also heard across Canada on the CBC. The Peach Pickers' segment was sponsored by Seven-Up; performance of the soft drink's jingle became an oft-requested item at their 'in person' shows. It was on their segment that Tommy Hunter made his national radio debut. Then seventeen, Canada's future 'country gentleman' thereafter hitch-hiked in from London as a regular guest.

The records made by Andrews and the Ranch Boys, a half-dozen sides on 78, made in the early 50s, recorded in Toronto and Buffalo studios, were not a financial success, because, as McMullen says, wryly, "both record companies went broke." One of the few originals they released, "Lord Alexander's Reel", did enter the repertoire of Canadian country music, with Andrews still getting royalty cheques for this fiddle tune decades later.

The Peach Pickers' recordings would today be called 'indie' productions. Goerz recalls Buffalo studio sessions on a Sunday morning "when we should have been in church." They sold well enough from the stage and "Niagara Moon" still gets airplay (for instance, on a CBC Radio anthology of traditional 'country', where I first heard it, three summers ago).

Both careers ended abruptly. In an accident driving home from Toronto in 1955, Andrews was crushed between two transport-trucks. Long convalescent with a broken back, Andrews needed "two screws in [his] shoulder" that impeded his bowing and ended his playing days. The McMullen Brother carried on a while under various names, but without the radio show.

The Peach Pickers came to a crossroads in August 1954. Playing on CHML for \$40 apiece per show -- almost equal a week's wages for Harder as apprentice mechanic -- nonetheless strained their farm and family ties. Angleman had negotiated a place on the upcoming television version of the Jamboree and arranged a tour with the Canadian

military in Japan and Korea. They entertained a tryout down in the States, appropriately on WWVA.

Without regret, all three chose heart and family over possible fame and fortune, disbanding amicably after a Jamboree farewell show. They have very seldom played publicly together since, though Goertzen plays for church and seniors functions and Goertz continued writing gospel songs.

In the defining of Canadian 'country music', Abbie Andrews and His Canadian Ranch Boys and the Lincoln County Peach Pickers were pioneers. Maybe those cowboy outfits did make a kind of sense after all.