

# DIVERSIONS

The Daily Tar Heel

Thursday, March 2, 2000 ■ PAGE 5

## A Little Bit Country A Little Bit Rock 'n' Roll

### Local Country Rides To Different Groove

By ERIN WYNIA  
Senior Writer

When music fans around the country think of mainstream music in Chapel Hill, they associate the area with indie rock.

Guitars here grind, not twang. Voices growl, not drawl. But amongst the well-established indie rock scene lies a group of bands dedicated to the preservation of another form of popular music — roots-based country.

Roots music includes older forms of country like the blues, string band music and bluegrass. Spearheaded by the alternative country act Whiskeytown, which has gained fame in national publications like Rolling Stone, the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area has groomed a faithful country music following in the past 10 years.

"This area has always been extremely supportive of what we're doing," said John Howie, lead singer of the high-energy honky-tonk band 2 Dollar Pistols.

While he said that alternative country acts like his generally found a strong group of supporters here, Howie hesitated to call the area's collection of roots-based bands a scene.

"Everybody's moving into their own little world," he said.

His band prefers to write in the style of older country bands, lending the music a more authentic, Southern feel than much of the music streaming out of Nashville in the past 10 years.

But Triangle groups like Whiskeytown betray more of a rock influence, while others like Trailer Bride tend to produce more experimental-sounding country music. Throw Tony-winning string band Red Clay Ramblers into the mix, and country music in the Triangle becomes even more of a stew, providing a true "alternative" to the

country music that floods airwaves.

Like roots musicians in other medium-sized Southeastern cities, Chapel Hill country bands find themselves eager to break away from Nashville's commercial tentacles.

"I want the music to not have to be this decidedly commercial, based-in-demographics music," Howie said. "(Nashville writers) just have certain set of ideas about the way things are done."

He described the Nashville industry as a restrictive, hit-making music center. Nashville artists, like pop country

chart-toppers Garth Brooks, Shania Twain, Faith Evans and Tim McGraw, do not write their own songs, and some Nashville studios make artists use backup musicians that are not a part of the band, Howie said. He said a group of musicians called the A-Team play on many albums coming out of Nashville.

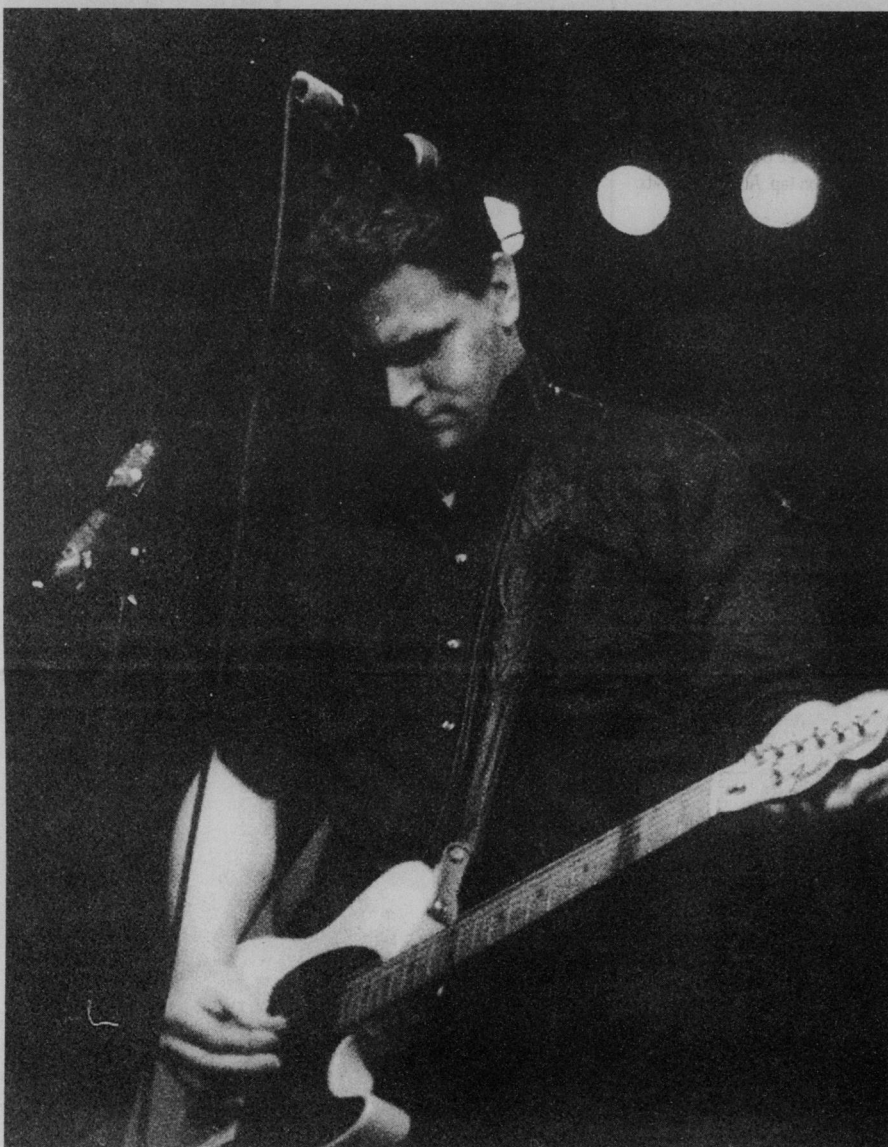
So, along with other Southern music meccas like Atlanta, with its large rockabilly scene, Chapel Hill country acts fill a much-needed void in the nation's roots music industry by adding other distinct musical voices to the options.

Kenny Roby, a former Six-String Drag member and roots-influenced rocker from Raleigh, said he appreciated the musical diversity that existed outside the world's country music capital.

"A lot of times you won't find the soul in music from Nashville than you would in other places," Roby said.

Not only does staying out of Nashville's looming corporate shadow yield a wider variety of music, musicians like Roby and Howie argued, but it also gives them a better audience.

"I prefer it in this area to a place like Tennessee or Texas because they've become jaded there," Howie said. He said Nashville's idea of commercial country had conditioned these audiences to expect a certain sound, and they became disappointed when they didn't hear it. When they hear old-style honky-tonk from 2 Dollar Pistols, he



DTH/CASEY QUILLEN

A Chapel Hill country favorite, the "Backsliders" performed Friday night as a part of the sixth annual Honky-Tonka-Rama at Local 506 on West Franklin Street.

said, they don't understand the music.

2 Dollar Pistols is not the only local band to suffer that fate. Chapel Hill-based Chicken Wire Gang, a band influenced by Southern blues, country and bluegrass, which comes closest in sound to bands like Flat Duo Jets and Southern Culture on the Skids, finds itself in the same position. Greg Bell, a songwriter, keyboardist and accordion player for the band, said touring up and down the East Coast revealed audiences' ignorance of country music.

"I think a lot of times, people don't know what to make of us," he said. "If we go north, we just blow people's minds, because it's so alien."

And like John Howie and 2 Dollar Pistols, Bell said his band steered clear of Nashville clubs.

"Chicken Wire Gang has generally avoided it," he said. "We've always wanted to play it, but we never wanted to be another Wednesday band that gets out with \$100 a night."

Bell said Chapel Hill had proven to be an excellent home for his country band. Not only can bands succeed in the Triangle without a large financial output, but they benefit from the camaraderie amongst area bands.

"We all have a similar interest in the honesty of music," he said. "The songs and the music basically speak for themselves."

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at [artsdesk@unc.edu](mailto:artsdesk@unc.edu).

### Alt-Country Colors Area Music Fest

Last weekend, the Franklin Street music venue Local 506 hosted the sixth annual Honky-Tonka-Rama.

By DANIELE EUBANKS  
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

A haze of smoke and the bitter smell of moist beer-breath hung in the air. A curly-haired man in an orange-checkered shirt, jeans and Airwalks banged out a tune on the keyboard, accompanied by Stuart Cole of the Squirrel Nut Zippers on guitar and a great big guy with a great big beard on a great big bass singing, "Sally let your bangs hang down!"

Night two of the sixth annual Honky-Tonka-Rama music festival was in full swing Saturday night at the Local 506. By midnight about 50 folks were swinging their hips and stomping their boots (some cowboy, some combat) to the Chicken Wire Gang's brand of American music.

The Gang joined Trailer Bride, Star Room Boys, Blue Balls Deluxe, Drive-By Truckers and The Backsliders to finish off the two-day festival, known for its punk-country fusion.

John Dzubak, doorman at the Local 506, peeked out from under his sparkling silver cowboy hat with eyes accented by deep-grey shadow and explained that the bands featured in the festival weren't the type you'd find in Nashville.

"This is underground country, country bands who grew up on punk — not your contemporary Nashville B.S.," he said.

Dave Robiness, the club's owner, agreed. He said the music was about real issues and real emotion.

"This isn't about candy-coated country — it's life — it's what's happening now," he said.

"There's nothing bad about it, 'cept you might shed a tear in your beer," Robiness added.

Nearly shedding a tear in his beer, Boo Kaufman, owner of Boo's Hideaway in Raleigh, complained about Nashville's commercialization of country.

"Country has been delivered by Nashville for too long as pop," Kaufman said.

"It started in the '70s and has just gotten worse — the same kind of canned music, same hooks.

"Too much country is really bad. It's not country, just rural — people singing about pickups and their dogs dying."

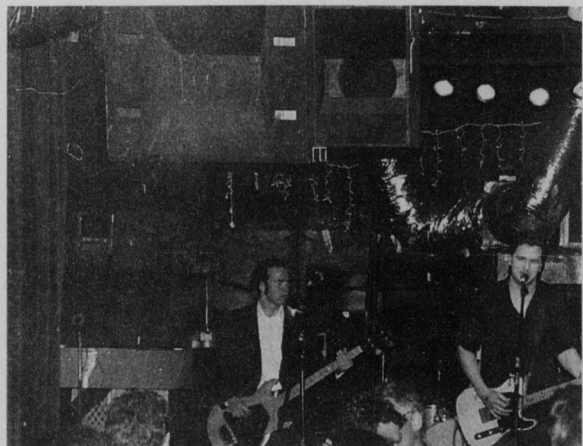
He went on to explain that the alt-country music being played at the Honky-Tonka-Rama and in clubs nationwide is a return to the musical roots of country music, boasting more originality than the bland pop-influenced tunes from the country Top 40 that fill the airwaves.

"It's just f--- good music," he said. "It gives kids who have an interest in playing the banjo or the fiddle or something the outlet to do it."

Melissa Swingle, Trailer Bride's songwriter and lead singer, said she taught herself to play the guitar, mandolin, banjo and saw in the last few years.

Swingle's rejection of tradition instruments ended in a multi-faceted musical personality that aids the group's unique style.

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DTH/CASEY QUILLEN

With bands that mix roots-country with modern music, the scene at last weekend's Honky-Tonka-Rama was far from the typical barn dance or Nashville club show.

### Fans Say Chapel Hill's Gone Country

"I guess I'd describe myself as an enlightened redneck — a sophisticated redneck."

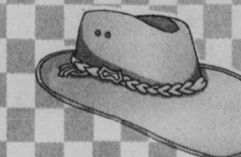
STU COLE  
SNZ and Chicken Wire Gang

"It's to the point. It has a little more emotion. ... It doesn't equal cheesy or lame."

MELISSA SWINGLE  
Trailer Bride

"This is more like art with a capital A."

MONICA LUBEGSTA  
Carrboro



"This is a lot of fun punk meets country like nothing you'd hear on the radio."

RAUL MOYLAN  
Chapel Hill

"I'm a big country fan. This is a little more new, like crazy alternative rock with some country thrown in, but I like most of it."

CRAY  
Chapel Hill



"There's nothing bad about it, 'cept you might shed a tear in your beer."

DAVE ROBINESS  
Owner of Local 506