

## **I'm a hillbilly**

### **A part of my story by John Harris Loflin**

My old journey with country music came to an end and a new chapter started this September as I watched all 8 nights/16 hours of "Country Music" a documentary by Ken Burns on WFYI Ch 20. I learned so much about country music and its history.

I learned country music brought together the fiddle from Europe and the banjo from Africa.

I learned that it was first called "hillbilly music" and in the 1940's it became known as country music and also Country & Western music.

Historically, hillbilly has been a derogatory term describing the "unsophisticated" country person who lived in rural mountainous areas of the Appalachians or Ozarks. They wore bib overalls, the children played with "whirligigs" and "whimmy diddles" and the adults smoked a corncob pipe, ate 'possum" and lived in "hollers" where they laid around drinking moonshine out of a jug with X's on it. Remember too the cartoon character "[Lil Abner](#)" or the early 1960's "The Beverly Hillbillies" TV show, or the movie *Deliverance* with Burt Reynolds. Look at the documentary, [Hillbilly](#).

What's most interesting, I also learned how important country music is to my life and who I am today.

I say this because from the first hour of the first show to the last show, I was crying. Yes, the 8-part series made me sad sometimes, so I cried. Actually, most of the shows and the stories made me happy...and I cried too. Hey, I mean I wasn't crying all the time. It was just that throughout the series I cried a lot. But, why?

Looking back now on the documentary and its affect on me, I see country music means more to me than I realized. I think it's because I grew up with country music as a part of my life.

I grew up around country music at home in the Appalachian culture of 1950's Fountain Square. My dad's parents were from North Carolina. My Grandpa Harrison "Hack" Loflin (Loflin's a Scotch-Irish name) and Grandma Hattie probably left there to find work in the coal mines of West Virginia. My dad Charles was born in Erskine, WV in 1913. My mom, Virginia Vornehm (German) was from Spencer, IN. As I mentioned, we watched a lot of county and gospel on TV.

It was in the 1950's that I listened to country on the radio along with pop (Doris Day or Perry Como), rockabilly (Carl Perkins and Buddy Holly), R&B (Ray Charles or The Platters) and then Rock n' Roll (Chuck Berry or Elvis).

I remember watching Porter Wagoner's "[Midwestern Hayride](#)" on WTTV/Ch 4 on Saturdays after the IU basketball games. He'd have various country music stars perform...and then later on, Dolly Parton was on his show.

On other TV shows, I remember the "[cloggers](#)" square dancing to Bluegrass music and a caller, and especially the all-male [country gospel quartets](#) with their high tenor and very low bass singers. All this fascinated me.

I remember the Roundup Tavern at 828 Virginia Ave. where the Interstate is now. I walked by it going to and from No. 8, the Calvin Fletcher school. It had some actual hitching posts on the sidewalk at the curb. I remember motorcycles parked at angles out front.

I also remember the early 1960s song, "Here I am I'm drunk again." It was by local rockabilly star Lattie Moore. He sang it at the Fountain Square Tavern at 1122 Prospect. I lived on the street just behind it at 1117 Woodlawn.

Me and my sisters, Janet and Linda, sang. Our mom, Virginia (Gin) taught us how to harmonize. We sang in the Harry E. Wood Junior High Concert Clubs and the Wood High School Senior Choir. (Thanks Mrs. Zenor.)

During the early 1960s, people got together to sing folk music at a [Hootenanny](#). Me and my sisters entered and won the Fountain Square Hootenanny back in 1962 which took place on the then parking lot on the southwest corner of Morris and Shelby St. Remember, they used to have carnivals with rides come thru and set up there? A Hook's Drug Store used to be there. A Family Dollar's there now.

The hootenanny people had pulled up and left a flat bed trailer and this was what the contestants performed on. We sang Woody Guthrie's "This land is your land" cappella. The prize for winning was a guitar from Arthur's Music that I soon learned how to play.

This led to us performing at the 1963 and 1964 Indiana State Fair Hootenanny contests. We studied the music of the Carter Family and the mountain music of J. E. Mainer, as well as the Delmore Bros.

Throughout the late 60's and early 70's, I listened to the folk music of Peter, Paul & Mary, Pete Seeger, Donovan, Bob Dylan, or Joan Baez.

After graduating from Wood in 1961, I entered Purdue as a science major and went to classes on the 38<sup>th</sup> St campus across from the fairgrounds—right next to Burger Chef. For my junior year, I went up to the West Lafayette campus. There I met 3 other folk singers and we formed the New Overlann Four. We did a lot of Kinston Trio-type songs and other folk music. I played the "washtub" bass. We won the 1964 Chicago Folk Festival. See the pictures below.

In the early 1960's, I was also influenced by Flatt & Scrugg's tune, [Foggy Mountain Breakdown](#) the bluegrass theme song from The Beverly Hillbillies TV show.

It was the summer of 1970. I hitch-hiked to Brown County, IN and Bean Blossom to Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Festival. I didn't have a ticket and snuck in by partly swimming across a pond. I remember so vividly as I came out of the water how I was astounded and taken by the power and dynamics of the sound of Bluegrass. It was thrilling. I've loved the music ever since.

I have a George Jones story that's a part of my journey. Back in the late 60s Merle Haggard had a song called, "[I'm just an Okie from Muskogee](#)" where he disparaged Hippies (even Beatniks like me) and anti-Vietnam war protesters. As a result, I listened less to country and more Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, folk music (Ian & Sylvia, Patrick Sky or Bob Dylan). I even started playing blues and jazz. See the pictures below from the mid-1970's where I was in the East 10<sup>th</sup> Street Indy blues band, Up from the Pavement, and was a member of the Muncie Jazz Ensemble.

To me, back then, George Jones was the main example of a country music singer. How he talked, his music, his voice--that twang, his looks (hair and dress)...taken together epitomized the "ignorant hillbilly" to me. Though I never heard him say anything or do anything that reinforced this negative stereotype, I still saw him (again without any proof) as a prejudice red neck--putting him in the same basket along with other people and politicians (Pres. Nixon) I disagreed with. I was prejudice towards him without ever meeting or talking to the man. Thus, I was prejudice towards country music and its stars, putting them in the same basket of negative stereotypes I had around Mr. Jones.

And, I have a Hank Williams story. It was 1982. I remember it well... I was too young back in the 40's and early 50's to have listened to his music. He died in '53. My family moved to the Fountain Square in 1952 when I was 9.

So in the 60's and 70's, I had heard of "Your cheatin' heart," "Jambalaya," or "Hey good lookin'" and his other songs, though I really wasn't a fan.

Anyway, I had just broken up with a woman name Sherry. We dated heavy. All of a sudden she didn't want to see me anymore. It had been about 2 months and we still weren't talking. I had a bad case of the blues. I got a bottle of Wild Irish Rose and listened over and over to a Hank's Greatest Hits album I got at the library.

I cried like a baby. Oh, his words and music, his singing, just tore me up. With all that hurt and loss built up inside, a good cry was just what I needed. I never experienced anything like that.

These 2 stories all came together when I met up with 2 men, Darry Montgomery and Larry Collins. I had known each as teenagers when I was a youth worker for the Highland-Tech Youth Council back in 1968 in the 9<sup>th</sup> St. and Highland neighborhood on the near-eastside of Indianapolis.

Around 10 years later, Darry had started a country music band, Darry & the Blue Lights. Darry played guitar and Larry played bass.

An opportunity came up in 1981 for me to join the band. I became a member of the Blue Lights. We played at Char's Bar (State & Wash. Sts.), Flo's Cardinal Bar (936 Virginia Ave,) Doug's Drinking Fountain (1705 Prospect), Vollrath's Tavern (E. Palmer & Talbot St.), the Keystone Bar (2405 English Ave) and the Little Eagle Tavern (3234 W. Wash. St.). I also played at Segal's (2136 W. Morris), Woodcutters (1417 Prospect) and Ray's Place (1021 Virginia Ave).

I had been raised on country music and gained an appreciation and knowledge of it and its connection to folk and bluegrass. Then I came to reject and criticize--even dislike country music--all while eventually ending up playing and singing it in Indy's honky-tonks.

Remember later, in the early 90's Barbara Mandrell sang [I was country when country wasn't cool?](#) That song explains that era real well.

So, my journey from country music (and its sensibilities and culture), then away from it, and then back to it makes me a son who left home, explored the world, saw his home culture in a new light and rejected it, and then returned home to embrace it again.

Faron Young, Red Foley, Little Jimmy Dickens, Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb, Grandpa Jones, Lefty Frizzell, Minnie Peril, Hank Snow, Stringbean, Webb Pierce, Patsy Cline, Eddy Arnold, Jim Reeves, Kitty Wells, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Stonewall Jackson, Conway Twitty, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, Buck Owens, Willie Nelson, Ronnie Milsap, Hank Jr., Janie Fricke, Bobby Bare, Freddie Fender, George Strait, the Bellamy Bros., Charlie Pride, Wylon Jennings, Eddie Rabbit, The Kendalls, Alabama, Ricky Skaggs, Mickey Gilley... I remember listening to all and more of these country music stars and they each had a big impression on me.

Country music's in my family. It's been a part of my life's journey and who I am. So, why was I crying? I think it's because I'm a hillbilly.

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Ribbon from the 1964 Indiana State Fair Hoosier Hootenanny



The New Overlann Four practice at Purdue dorm



The New Overlann Four play concert at Purdue

### Purdue Group Cops Top Spot At Folk Fest

Among the 80 folksong teams from the midwest who auditioned at the Chicago Folk Festival on Feb. 20 was a winning foursome of Purdue students.

Known as The Overlann Four, John Loflin, of the Indianapolis Regional Campus, Bill Pfanstie and Mike Bruner of the Lafayette campus, and Doug Gibson, formerly of the Lafayette campus and now at the University of Northern Illinois, won first prize. **1964-1965**

The competition was first narrowed to eight groups, which were each allowed a 15-minute performance. Emerging victorious from the eight-group sing-off was The New Overlann Four.

The talented team of Purdue singers appeared last year at the Indiana State Fair; they have also performed on TV and radio. They have been singing together for about a year and one-half.

1965 News article in Purdue about Chicago Folk Festival



Up from the Pavement E. 10<sup>th</sup> St. blues band 1976



Muncie Jazz Ensemble 1977



Me, Darry and Larry Char's Bar 1980

MAY / 98

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