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# Hillbilly Blast from the Past: The Role of the Border Blaster Stations in the Diffusion and Popularization of Country Music, 1931-1943

**By: Lawrence D. Taylor**

Abstract: The establishment of several border blaster stations by American entrepreneurs in Mexican northeastern border towns in the 1930's and early 1940's played an important part in the popularization and diffusion of "hillbilly" (today's country or western music) in the U.S. primarily, but also to a certain extent in Canada, Mexico and other regions within reach of their airwaves. An important foundation for this development was laid in the 1920's during radio's early history in that not only did broadcasters and record manufacturers discover that there was an important listening audience emerging for this type of music, but that it also harmonized well with commercial advertising aims and strategies.

In tracing the regional origins of country music, scholars have generally focused on areas of North America north of the Río Grande such as the Appalachian heartland, the American South and, in more recent decades, regions west of the Mississippi. It is generally agreed that “country” as a musical genre had its earliest roots in Appalachian musical styles and singing and, in later periods, was centered mainly in the U.S. South. More recent studies have drawn attention to its growth and development in other regions of the continent, such as the western U.S. and certain areas of southern Canada (Cohen, 2014:126-37).

With regards to the period in question, it is important to stress that “hillbilly” or “old-time” --particularly the former-- were the terms more commonly used to refer to such music. Nowadays “hillbilly” is considered to be a derogatory term used to demean and humiliate poor working class whites; it is also used to refer colloquially to people from the Appalachian region in particular. Nevertheless, “hillbilly” and “old-time” were the terms most commonly used to refer to such music and their performers, even though the latter did not personally think of themselves as “hillbillies”. This was the case until the mid-1940’s, when “country” and “western” began to supplant these older terms (Green, 1965: 206-22). It is for this reason that the term “hillbilly” will be used to refer to the development of this type of music for the period under study and “country” when referring to the more general aspects of the development of country music as a musical genre.

What has been largely overlooked in the musical historiography of country music is the role that the so-called “border blaster” radio stations of the 1930’s and early 1940’s played in its growth and popularization. The border blaster stations, established by American promoters in certain border towns of northeastern Mexico during this period with the consent of the Mexican federal government, were primarily aimed at reaching a much larger domestic consumer and entertainment audience than permitted by existing U.S. laws and regulations.

Although there are several monographs dealing with the history of the border blaster stations, these have primarily dealt with the careers of the flamboyant American promoters who established these facilities and the history of these powerful transmitters as an aspect of the sociocultural milieu of the period (Fowler and Crawford, 1987; Ortiz Garza, 1997; Lee, 2002; Brock, 2008). The works by Fowler and Crawford and Ortiz Garza, in particular, have described the impact which the border blasters had on attempts to regulate radio transmissions affecting the U.S. and Mexico, as well as the ways in which they reflected the peculiar and sometimes contradictory aspects of regional development in both countries.

I argue, however, that the border blasters also had a significant impact on the development of country music in that they helped to popularize this particular genre in the U.S. Up to that time, radio transmission had been very urban centered and, as a consequence, the regional reach of radio music had been fairly limited. With the construction of the border blasters, however, the range of transmission was greatly increased as their signals could be received not only in the U.S., Mexico and Canada but in other foreign countries as well.

Secondly, from a geographical point of view, the U.S.-Mexico border, with its mainly agricultural and ranching economy, also proved a fertile seedbed for the intermingling of cultural influences. Although the border blaster stations were established principally for commercial gain, the musical entertainment they provided as an aid to this process, including as it did a mixture of both country and Mexican musical programming, led to a cultural interchange that helped to promote the internationalization of both country and Latina musical heritages.

### Early radio and country music broadcasting:

The radio “craze” or boom in development of the early 1920's played a pivotal role in the transformation of country music into its modern forms of musical representation.

Prior to the advent of radio, what would later evolve into “country” music was almost exclusively the province of amateurs or amateur groups. There were no professional or “star” performers, nor were there records or “hits” of particular tunes or songs.

Though country music would not remain confined to rural areas of the South and Midwest, at that time a significant proportion of Americans --close to half in 1920-- lived on farms. In addition, although radio was principally directed to urban audiences, it was already reaching out to farming communities. In 1921 the U.S. Department of Agriculture began transmitting reports on meteorological conditions, up-to-date information on the prices of farm products and other useful information to local stations. By the autumn of 1924 it was reported that there were approximately 364,000 radio sets on farms in different areas of the nation; some eighteen months later, however, it was estimated that there were close to a million (Craig, 2001:332-34).

Hillbilly music first appeared on radio stations in the South. During this early period of radio, programming of such music often consisted of a mixture of old-time, folk, ethnic music and hymn singing. It is likely that the first station to play hillbilly music was WSB Atlanta, owned by the *Atlanta Journal* and the first radio station in the region. The station began transmitting in mid-March 1922 with a 100-watt capacity which was eventually increased a decade later to 50,000-watts. Programming featured folk performers such as the Reverend Andrew Jenkins, a blind gospel singer, Fiddlin' John Carson and his daughter Rosa-Lee Carson, Riley Puckett, Roba Stanley, Earl Johnson, Clayton McMichen and his bands, and Gid Tanner (Douglas, 1987:176-77; Bluegrass, n.d.).

Although recordings of hillbilly music showed certain potential (as in the case of performer Vernon Dalhart), artists were supported by the radio show and its advertised products. Hillbilly musicians and groups were also economical to hire in comparison with performers of classical music, opera or “pop” music of the day. With some notable exceptions, such as cowboy singer Jimmy Rogers, for example, hillbilly performers did not, in general, receive much money for their work. The bulk of their income came from the live shows themselves; secondly, from photographs and self-published song folios which they sold by direct inquiry; and, thirdly, whatever recordings were marketed by the music industry. In the event that they were able to negotiate with record companies' royalties from the sale of their music and songs, this likewise did not amount to much, the normal rate being half a cent per record sold (Pecknold, 2007:15).

One important form of hillbilly programming consisted of the “barn dance”. WBAP station, Fort Worth, initiated this type of programming in early January 1923. The WBAP barn dance consisted of an hour and a half of square dance and fiddle music led by Captain M.J. Bonner, an old-time fiddler and ex-Confederate officer. The station's signal found clear reception in Texas, the South and Midwest, but it also reached more distant regions such as Canada and Hawaii (Douglas, 1987:177; Schroeder, 1998:30-37; Pecknold, 2007:15). Barn dance music served as a cultural complement to the agricultural and economic information that farmers were already receiving over the radio (Broadway, 1923:XX10).

The WSM Barn Dance, forerunner of the WSM Grand Ole Opry, began airing at the end of November 1925 in the new fifth-floor radio studio of the National Life & Accident Insurance Company in downtown Nashville. Its first featured artist was the 77-year-old fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson, who convinced the program's initiator George G. "Judge" Hay to expand the one hour program into four hour sessions. Pioneer artists and groups on the program included Bill Munroe, the Possum Hunters, the Fruit Jar Drinkers, the Brinkley Brothers' Dixie Clodhoppers, Uncle Dave Macon, Sid Harkreader, Deford Bailey, Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, and the Gully Jumpers.<sup>1</sup>

The largest and most influential of the "barn dance" programs of the period was the "WLS Barn Dance", inaugurated in April 1924 by the WLS station, owned by Sears, Roebuck & Company, in Chicago. In its initial program, hosted on a small mezzanine of the Sherman Hotel, the group of country-style fiddlers that was scheduled as only a support for the hotel's main attraction, the Isham Jones Dance Band, received hundreds of written responses from the radio listening public asking for more fiddle and square dance music. Early "country" stars of the program, which became known as the National Barn Dance after becoming a network show (1933), included Tommy Dandurand, Tom Owens, Chubby Parker, Pie Plant Pete, Walter Peterson, Rube Tronson, Cecil and Ethel Ward, and Bradley Kincaid (Biggar, 1971:105-12).

Since Chicagoans were not all that familiar with hillbilly music, the program's founder, Edgar L. Bill, was obliged to incorporate a wider variety of sentimental pop tunes, "heart songs" and old-fashioned music with a countrified flavor. Prominent artists forming this latter group included Irish tenor Bill O'Connor, female contralto singer Grace Wilson, the Maple City Four Quartette, and the organist Ralph Waldo Emerson (Douglas, 1987:177-78; WLS, n.d.). The inclusion of such elements underlined the fact that, while "hillbilly" may have conjured for many people the image of white or rural working class tastes, such hybrid programming gave the barn dance a tone of middle-class respectability. The old-time music appealed to an aging farm population while the parlor ballads and heart songs served as a counterweight to the raucous jazz and ragtime music that was popular in the cities, especially among the younger age groups. In general, it was the nostalgic appeal to a simpler lifestyle that constituted the key factor in the appeal of hillbilly music to audiences --a characteristic that has remained the case with country music up to the present (McCusker, 1998:174-79).

Sales of country music recordings reflected this wide-ranging audience. Purchasers of hillbilly records included not only farmers but laborers, mechanics, salesmen and merchants. As one record dealer commented, "What could be more absurd than this [hillbilly music]? Only one thing--the existence of hundreds of thousands of native Americans who love and buy it" (Pecknold, 2007:22-23). Records of "hillbilly" music were sold not only to inhabitants of regions where it was commonplace but in other areas of the country as well (Douglas, 1987:177). Not only did hillbilly recordings appeal to a diverse listening public but they were also cheaper to produce than other types of musical genres; in addition, because of the small but reliable audience for them, they were also considered to be a profitable investment (Malone, 1985:62,95).<sup>2</sup>

Several hillbilly singers rose to stardom as a result of this early phase of radio programming. Examples include the previously-mentioned Bradley Kincaid, a Kentucky youth who had migrated to Chicago with the intention of attending the YMCA College there, but instead became one of the featured entertainers of the WLS Barn Dance. Another example is

Uncle Dave Macon, an elderly Tennessee banjo picker, who, in 1926, became the first real star of Memphis's WLS Barn Dance. The rise of the "country star" also led to the change in hillbilly music from being primarily instrumental in character to vocal, even though the process took several years to develop (Malone, 1985:50-68; Douglas, 1987:179).

In short, radio took hillbilly music out of its various regional locations and gave it an airwave audience in the same manner that it did to classical and popular music of the day, including jazz. By professionalizing hillbilly, it transformed it, through the promotion and sale of records and hit songs, into what would ultimately become a highly marketable and profitable business.

#### The border blasters and the boost to country music diffusion:

The establishment of the border blaster stations in the Mexican northeastern border region was the result of a complex set of circumstances involving the efforts of the American government to regulate radio transmission frequencies, the ambitions of certain American business entrepreneurs who resisted the restraints of domestic broadcasting regulations, and the initial authorization given by the Mexican government to the entrepreneurs' projects to build transmission facilities on Mexican soil.

The attempts by the U.S. government to regulate radio frequencies began in 1912 when it published the first legislation relating to radio transmission and began issuing licenses to those wishing to operate transmitters (An Act, 1912). During the First World War, for reasons of security, the U.S. Navy controlled radio operations to reduce interference between radio receivers on land and ships operating at sea and in coastal waters. Following the Armistice, however, the government decided, in view of the surge in interest in amateur radio, that the new industry should remain in the hands of private initiative (Government, 1919:10-11; Schubert, 1971:91-159).

During the early 1920's, as numerous organizations, newspapers, companies and individuals began establishing their own radio stations in different places, the number of operating stations increased notably. Although only eight stations existed in 1921, for example, by the following year (1922) the number had increased to 564. The amount of capital invested in the radio industry also rose dramatically, from \$60 million in 1922 to \$358 million in 1924. By the end of the decade (1929), this latter sum had increased to more than \$842.5 million (approximately 1,400 percent) (Jome, 1925:70; Allen, 1964:64-6, 136-38).

In Mexico commercial radio had also begun in the early 1920's. Nevertheless, its development during that decade was somewhat limited. In 1928, for example, *The New York Times* reported that there were only 28 stations in the country (Radio, 1928:146).

By the early 1930's, the panorama had changed completely with a notable proliferation of stations and increased access to radio receivers among the country's inhabitants. By 1935 there were around 250,000 receivers in different regions of the country, although the majority of them were located in the Federal District. During this period Mexico imported the majority of its radio sets from the U.S. as was the case with a great number of manufactured items such as automobiles, typewriters, heavy machinery, watches, perfumes, toothpaste, shaving equipment and so forth (Money, 1941:E-2; Hayes, 2000:44).

Despite the advances in the expansion of Mexico's broadcasting industry, there existed a

serious obstacle to its potential development owing to a dispute between the U.S. and Mexico concerning the distribution of radio frequencies between the two countries.

This “dispute” had its origins in the Mexican revolutionary period from 1910-1920. The Mexican Revolution was one of the first wars of the twentieth century in which a variety of modern technologies, including airplanes and wireless telegraphy, were used by the belligerents. Portable field radios were employed by the Porfirian army during the Madero revolt of 1910-1911 and also utilized on various occasions by the forces led by Madero, Huerta, Carranza, Villa and Zapata. The Constitutionalist forces headed by Carranza made greater and more expanded use of wireless communications than the other factions, especially from 1915-1920. To improve communications with their various units in the field, the Constitutionalists built wireless stations in Saltillo and Tampico and also improved existing facilities, such as those at Veracruz and Mexico City. At the same time, the Constitutionalists captured and shut down transmitter facilities operated by enemy forces (the Villistas and Zapatistas), including radio equipment operated by American mines and businesses in Mexico on the grounds that the latter were providing government and commercial agents in the U.S. with information concerning Carrancista counterinsurgency operations (Castro, 2013:346-50).

The intervention of the U.S. in World War One on the side of the Entente in early April 1917 resulted in the tightening of American controls on communications both within and through their country. Not only were American authorities concerned with the activities of enemy agents, sympathizers and saboteurs operating within the U.S. itself, but the presence of some 50 German agents in Mexico also caused concern. It was known, for instance, that German assessors were helping the Carranza government to construct a powerful transmitter and receiver on the grounds of the presidential residence at Chapultepec Castle. In return, Mexican communications officials helped transmit German war news to their agents in Mexico and also to El Salvador, where the Carranza government built a radio station (Buchenau, 1996:126-27).

A part of this legacy of tensions arising from the decade of revolutionary struggle in Mexico and the First World War carried over into the boom period in radio development in both countries. There were, in addition, differences in outlook as to the control of radio broadcasting, whether it was to remain fundamentally a prerogative of the federal government in each case, or in the hands of private initiative.

Although Mexico City had been selected by the Fifth International Congress of American States to host the first conference of the International Committee of the Pan American Union on Electrical Communication, which opened 27 May 1924, little was achieved towards an agreement among the participant nations concerning radio transmission frequencies. The refusal of the American government to accept the findings of this conference was based on what it perceived to be a tendency on the part of Mexico toward government control or monopoly --if not outright government ownership-- of electrical communication, which the U.S. believed to be counter to the spirit of private enterprise. The latter upheld this position even after modifications were made to the Mexico City conference findings a year later in Rio de Janeiro (1925), which declared that although broadcasting was a service of an official nature, “all electrical communication facilities were declared to be open equally to all” (Harbord, 1926:471-72; Barbour, 1940:95).

The Radio Act, which the U.S. Senate passed in February 1927, proclaimed that radio frequencies belonged to the people and that it was the responsibility of the federal government to

administer use of radiowaves in the interests of the public. To implement this idea, the U.S. government established the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) with the task of authorizing and assigning, under the auspices of the Secretary of Commerce, frequencies to the various stations (Radio, 1927).

As a result of a third conference held in Washington, D.C. that same year (1927), an organized system of “call letters”, or identification codes, was elaborated. In addition, since the U.S. possessed the majority of radio stations, it reserved the bulk of radio frequencies for its own country's transmitters. Only a small number of frequencies were authorized for Mexico and Canada (Barbour, 1940:95-96).<sup>3</sup>

Although the American government had strived to bring order to the chaos in broadcasting operations in the U.S., its stinginess with regard to the distribution of frequencies to Mexico was not conducive to the fostering of good relations and understanding between the two countries on broadcasting issues.

The conflict and disagreement with regard to broadcasting regulations between the U.S. and Mexico allowed certain American entrepreneurs to take advantage of this situation to install powerful radio transmitters in Mexican territory, in defiance of U.S. domestic radio regulations, in order to promote their commercial interests. Two factors favored this development. The Mexican government, annoyed at being unable to negotiate a satisfactory arrangement with the U.S. regarding frequency allocations, was inclined to accede to the entrepreneurs' requests to establish stations in Mexico. Secondly, the latter, by investing substantially in certain Mexican border towns (Villa Acuña, Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo), as well as the boost which these investments imparted to their local economies, were able thereby to gain support among Mexican local and state authorities.

The initial or pioneer border radio “baron” was Dr. John R. Brinkley, who had acquired a certain notoriety in the U.S. as a practitioner of quack medicine. Earlier in his career, while in Los Angeles, Brinkley became interested in the potential of radio as an advertising and marketing medium. After building his own radio station, KFKB, in Milford, Kansas, his already lucrative business involving goat “gland” implants to improve male virility<sup>4</sup> allowed him to accumulate considerable wealth. In 1930, however, the Kansas Medical Board revoked his medical license and, six months later, the FRC refused to renew his radio operating license on the grounds that Brinkley's broadcasts were mostly advertising (thus violating international treaties) and also contained obscenity that was contrary to the public interest (Brock, 2008:80-163).

In view of the limited possibilities for continuing with his activities in Kansas or other states, Brinkley decided to sell KFKB to an insurance company and move to Del Río, Texas. He was aware that radio transmission from XED in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, was capable of reaching Kansas, his state of residence; this gave him the idea for building a high powered station in Villa Acuña (Ciudad Acuña), located across the border in Coahuila, Mexico (Simmons, 1978:9).

In January 1931, following an audience with the Mexican Secretary of Communications Juan Andreu Almazán in Mexico City, the Mexican government granted Brinkley permission to build and operate a transmitter of up to 75,000 watts in Villa Acuña (Permiso, 1931). In addition to Mexico's discontent over the short shift it felt it had received from U.S. international broadcasting regulations, it is also possible that its decision may have been influenced by the fact that Almazán belonged to the more conservative faction of the ruling revolutionary party (PRI) and favored boosting industrial development with the help of foreign investment (Pereyón



Azpeitia, 1971:103).

Since foreigners, under Article 25 of the Electrical Communications Law, were prohibited from owning radio stations, a Mexican titular company, the “Compañía Radio Difusora de Acuña, S.A.”, was formed, headed by Coahuilan Senator Pablo Valdés who contributed some 6,000 dollars to the new corporation.<sup>5</sup> The new station went on the air in late October 1931. The following year (1932), the Mexican government authorized Brinkley to increase the power of the new station, XER (changed to XERA in 1935) from 50,000 to 150,000 watts and, some months later, to 1 million watts, making it one of the most powerful transmitters in the world. On clear nights, its signals were capable of reaching Canada, Hawaii, Alaska, Brazil, Peru and other distant regions (Ortiz Garza, 1997:37-49; Brock, 2008:175-76).<sup>6</sup>

Program content on the Brinkley border blaster was similar to that of his old Kansas station: medical advice tied to the selling of advertising products which pharmacies, both local and regional, sold under agreement with Brinkley himself, who received 25 percent of the profits. The emphasis on drugs and medicinal products of program commercials was in keeping with the broadcasting of hillbilly music at the national level. Many farmers and rural folk in general, especially in the poorer sections of the country, had either a fear of doctors or had no money to spend on proper medical care and hence were more prone to resort to cheaper alternatives (Malone, 1985:101).

Sponsors discovered that sales increased substantially when the advertising was supported by programs featuring hillbilly singers. The musical portions of the programming, which were predominantly either traditional or hillbilly, were more in the form of interludes; nevertheless, they helped provide the necessary ambience for establishing a rapport between the station and listeners. For the border blaster station Brinkley retained the practice at KFKB of having live entertainment rather than simply playing records (Wood, 1934:225). Featured performing groups on these types of broadcasting stations were made up of white musicians and the listening audiences targeted were predominantly white.<sup>7</sup>

Economics also favored hillbilly music programming. Sponsors tended to be high-risk, low-profit industries such as food staple producers and medicinal companies. Examples included Crazy Water Crystals, JFG (J.F. Goodson) Coffee, Hillbilly Flour and others. The cost of producing a hillbilly show was also much less than a successful pop show. Many advertisers used hillbilly music as part of a coordinated regional campaign strategy. Sponsors could attain broad regional or national coverage at local and independent rates; moreover, advertising time slots were also less expensive than time devoted to pop music (Pecknold, 2007:19).

Hillbilly programming on the border blaster stations consisted of a variety of entertainment such as close-harmony duet singers, duet bands, gospel quartets, yodelers, folk balladeers and family groups, as well as so-called “cowboy” singers: Roy Faulkner, the “Lonesome Cowboy”, J.R. Hall, the “Utah Cowboy” (who was actually from Crowley, Texas), and many others. Several of these musicians appeared on other border blaster stations during the period in question; for many of them it was their first opportunity to reach a significantly large listening audience.

The first group to achieve popularity on the Brinkley and other border blaster stations was the Pickard Family. Founded by Obed (Obediah) “Dad” Pickard of Ashland City, Tennessee, in the mid-1920's the group became linked not only with the Grand Ole Opry but also played in large northern urban centers such as Detroit and Chicago (Wolfe, 1999:157-62). Sponsored by

the Consolidated Royal Chemical Corporation of Chicago, manufacturer of products such as Kolorbak hair dye and Peruna cough medicine, the Pickards (father Obed, his wife Leila May “Little Mother” and children Ruth, Bubb, Charlie and Ann) arrived at Del Río in 1937 as the core group for the Brinkley station's musical entertainment.

The Pickards followed a pattern typical of much hillbilly and popular programming of the Depression era. Opening the show with rousing songs such as “How Many Biscuits Can You Eat This Morning”, they always ended it with an old-fashioned or traditional religious hymn in an effort to instill hope and provide spiritual sustenance in such trying times. Listener responses, often as high as 20,000 letters a week, not only boosted considerably their own popularity nationally but also enhanced the profits of their advertising patrons (Fowler and Crawford, 1987:172-74).<sup>8</sup>

The Carter Family --Alvin Pleasant “A.P.” Delaney Carter (1891-1960), his wife Sara Dougherty Carter (1898-1979), and his sister-in-law Maybelle Addington Carter (1909-1978)-- was another notable group that performed on the Brinkley station. The Carter Family, from Scott County, southwestern Virginia, was among the first vocal groups to become hillbilly music stars. Between 1927 and 1941, the Carters recorded for every major record company and made some 270 records, many of which had a profound impact on the development of country, bluegrass, gospel, pop and rock music of later decades (Wolfe, 2001:2-6).

In October 1938, in response to an invitation from the Consolidated Royal Brinkley sponsors, the Carters moved from Virginia to Del Río, Texas.<sup>9</sup> Prior to their Del Río engagement the Carters had not yet performed on radio. Their contract was seasonal, from October to March (when the weather was inclement in their home state). Each member of the group was paid 75 dollars for a twice-daily weekly program (the four hour “Good Neighbor Get-Together”); Consolidated also gave the family a new Chevrolet car as a bonus. Judging from the thousands of fan letters that soon poured into the Del Río studio (as many as 25,000 a week), the Carters proved to be the most popular singing group on the station. They performed for a second season (October 1939 to March 1940), when their children (Jeanette, Helen, June and Anita) were incorporated into the show sessions (Kahn, 1996:208-212; Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 2002:212-17).

The Carters' seasonal performances on XERA gave them a national audience as opposed to a merely regional one (the Southeast). As time went by, they did an increasingly larger part of their programming on 16 inch electrical transcription disks at Maybelle's new residence in San Antonio. Radio transcription disks, nicknamed platters, were specially designed phonograph records intended for, or recorded from, radio broadcasts. The recording of their songs on such disks permitted the Carter Family music to continue being played on the border stations after the Villa Acuña transmitter was shut down by the Mexican government in March 1941; copies were made and sent to other border stations such as XEG (Reynosa, also a Brinkley station) and XENT (Nuevo Laredo). Virginia musicians Hugh Jack “Doc” Addington and Carl P. McConnell, relatives of Sara and Maybelle, also recorded transcriptions for the border blaster stations (McConnell, 1976; Wolfe, 2001:11).<sup>10</sup>

The inclusion of Mexican music opened up opportunities for some forms of musical acculturation. Initial Mexican programming featured selections by the Studio Mexican Orchestra and the Sabinas Orchestra; it was later broadened to include *norteña* music characterized by accordion playing and the polka. In part, the inclusion of “Latina” music was owing to the

station's need to comply with the Mexican government's requirement that a portion of the programming on its country's stations be dedicated to the playing of Mexican music. This requirement became even more stringent in the Cárdenas period with the passage of the broadcasting Reglamento of 1936, which demanded that every program contain at least 25 percent of "typical Mexican music" (Reglamento, 1936).

Of the Mexican and Mexican-American singers who sang on XER/XERA, Rosa Domínguez, a Mexican singer of ballads or folk tunes, was particularly outstanding. Beginning her career in 1931, Domínguez's excellent soprano voice quickly earned her renown as "Mexico's Nightingale". Under the sponsorship of the Eagle Pass Junior Chamber of Commerce, she sang as part of the inauguration festivities of XED station in Reynosa, Tamaulipas (the forerunner of XEAW), in 1930, as well as Brinkley's XER the following year (1931). Domínguez's performance led to a regular slot on XER, sponsored by Willard's patent medicine tablets. Her songbook for the Brinkley programming consisted of a mixture of traditional Mexican songs and some that were more popular internationally such as "Estrellita", "Cielito Lindo" and "Mi Viejo Amor" (Fowler and Crawford, 1987:26-27, 105-06).

Another notable singer was Lydia Mendoza, dubbed the "Alondra de la Frontera". Born in Houston, Texas, in 1916, Mendoza moved with her family to San Antonio in 1928 when she was twelve years old; there, she and her sisters, under their father's management, made their first recorded songs as a group for the Okeh records label. After hearing one such performance in San Antonio's Plaza del Zacate, Tejano broadcaster Manuel J. González offered Lydia a guest appearance on his radio show *Voz Latina*. These live radio sessions paved the way for a series of recordings, in 1934, for Bluebird Records, a subsidiary of RCA Victor, including her first hit song "*Mal Hombre*". These, in turn, led to an intensive schedule of touring and successive recording sessions, including performances at XERA and other border blaster stations established during this period (Strachwitz and Nicolopolos, 1993; Broyles-González, 2001:5-27).

There is some evidence that Mexican music influenced the development of hillbilly or country music in this period, particularly with regards to the adoption of guitar techniques and songs. The Light Crust Doughboys, sponsored by the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company of Fort Worth (after which the border blaster mogul Willard Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, discussed further on, patterned his own band The Hillbilly Boys), used an accordion along with fiddle, guitar, banjo, steel guitar and drums. It is also possible that the *corridos* sung by Lydia Mendoza and other Latino performers may have influenced the musical styles of other hillbilly artists of the period (Roberts, 1979:96-97; Peel, 2015:5-12).

The reverse situation is also true to some extent. Although it is probable that Mexican music had a greater impact on the formation of country music than vice versa, the latter did succeed in winning over some *aficionados*. Mexican field workers in the border regions often referred to the radio as the "mockingbird" (*sinsonte*) and enjoyed both the Spanish and English musical programming. Mexican communications magnate Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, mentioned further on, was particularly fond of hillbilly music, a taste he had acquired early in his career while working for the "Mexico Music" division of RCA (Fowler and Crawford, 1987:163-64).<sup>11</sup>

The success of the Brinkley operations at Villa Acuña motivated other American promoters to build transmitters of their own in other Mexican northeastern border communities.

One of these was Norman G. Baker who, in mid-1932, obtained permission from the

Mexican government to construct XENT radio station eight miles south of Nuevo Laredo on the highway to Monterrey, for the purpose of promoting his alleged cure for cancer (Progress, 1932:XX5).<sup>12</sup> XENT programming, which began after Christmas 1933, consisted of medical announcements with hillbilly or country music performed by regional musicians and up-and-coming artists. The most prominent group were the Hillbilly Boys, formed by Texas politician W.L. "Pappy" O'Daniel to help him sell his flour company's Hillbilly Flour as well as help in his political campaigns. The band included cowgirl singer Kitty Williamson (dubbed the "Texas Rose" by O'Daniel), Kermit Whalen, O'Daniel's sons Pat and Mike, as well as Leon Huff, the "Texas Songbird", one of the finest singers and yodelers of the 1930's. XENT was eventually forced to close in early 1941 following Baker's indictment by the U.S. government for mail fraud (Juhnke, 2002:29-62).

Further northwest along the Río Grande, a group of San Antonio businessmen, together with the Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras Chambers of Commerce, succeeded in establishing, with the aid of Coahilan senator Pablo Valdés, the Compañía Radiodifusora de Piedras Negras, XEPN (Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras), approximately nine miles northwest of Piedras Negras. XEPN, also known as the "Voice of the Western Hemisphere", aired in early November 1932 with a broadcasting strength of 100,000 watts (Fowler and Crawford, 1987:77-95).

The station's opening led to a flow of cowboy and hillbilly artists --mainly from Texas-- to sing over its airwaves. Among those who performed at XEPN at one time or another were: Zeke Williams and his Rambling Cowboys (Lubbock), Jesse Rogers (cousin to Jimmy Rodgers) from Waynesboro, Mississippi, Shelly Lee Alley's Cowboy Band (Houston), Tex Ivey and His Original Ranch Boys, and Doc Schneider and his Texas Yodeling Cowboys (Atlanta) (Fowler and Crawford, 1987:82).

The most notable of these performers was Cowboy Slim Rinehart, often referred to as the "King of Border Radio". Born Nolan Alfred Rinehart in 1911 near Gustine, Texas, Rinehart began his career playing with the Skyrockets and other local Texas hillbilly groups. In 1937 he began his stint at XEPN as part of the "Good Neighbor Get-Together", a twice a day segment that included other hillbilly singers and musicians such as Doc Hopkins, Russ Pike and the Modern Pioneers. During the Second World War, several Hollywood producers offered Rinehart film roles; Rinehart turned them down on the grounds that not only would he have to change his "German sounding" surname but also alter his show style and appearance. Instead, he chose to continue singing on the border blaster circuit and even did a stint at XEG Monterrey, Nuevo León.

Rinehart did not record his songs, preferring instead to sell copies of his songbooks to fans. He was able, nevertheless, to syndicate his programs based on recordings from transcription disks to all the high-potential Mexican stations from Tijuana to Tampico. Rinehart was reputedly on the verge of cutting a recording with Decca when he was tragically killed in a car accident in Detroit in late October 1948 (Dallas, 2002; O'Donovan, 2010).

Frequently partnered with Rinehart on these border programs was Patsy Montana, born Ruby Blevins in 1914 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Before Montana's rise to fame, female singers of hillbilly music were basically limited to performing typecast roles such as mother, sweetheart or rube comedienne. Starting her career as a teenager, Montana performed as a fiddler and yodeler with groups in California, Oregon and Louisiana and also recorded with the Victor company in New Jersey. In 1933 she joined the Kentucky Ramblers string band in Chicago, which became

the Prairie Ramblers after Montana's incorporation. From that date until the end of the 1940's, the Prairie Ramblers was one of the finest country musical touring and recording groups in the U.S. In 1935 Montana recorded "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart", which became the first great hit song by a country female artist (Germann and Bufwack, 1996:78-82).

The last of the border blaster entrepreneurs of the period was the Texas businessman and philanthropist Carr P. Collins. In the spring of 1939, Collins negotiated, with O'Daniel as business associate, the purchase of XEAW radio station in Reynosa for the purpose of promoting Crazy Water Crystals, obtained by boiling down water which percolated from the Crazy Well at Mineral Wells in northern Texas. The station had originally aired in the fall of 1930 as XED owned by the International Broadcasting Company, which, although officially a Mexican corporation, was made up mostly of Texan investors. Since 1935 XED had been owned by Brinkley who, interested in moving his clinics to Arkansas, sold it to Collins. By then, the station's power had been expanded from 50,000 to 150,000 watts.

As in the case of the other border blasters, hillbilly music was a mainstay of XEAW programming. This was in keeping with previous Crazy Water marketing strategy. The Crazy Water Barn Dance, a spin-off program aired by stations in Georgia and the Carolinas, included performers such as the Tennessee Ramblers, the Monroe Brothers, J.E. Mainer's Crazy Mountaineers, and Homer "Pappy" Sherrill's Crazy Hickory Nuts (Grundy, 1995:1594-1617). XEAW continued this tradition in large part with the exception that cowboy singers made transcriptions in Dallas, which were then shipped to Reynosa for airplay. Mexican or Mexican inspired music was provided by McAllen businessman Arnaldo Ramírez, who purchased airtime on the station to feature performers such as Rosa Domínguez and other artists from the border region (Fowler and Crawford, 1987:110, 162-63).

By the late 1930's, the American managed border blaster businesses had begun to collapse. Changes in Mexico's radio and broadcasting policies, spearheaded by media magnate Emilio Azcárraga, who aspired to eliminate the border blasters so that his growing media empire would have access to American broadcast frequencies (Robins, 1938:164), led to the North American Regional Broadcasting Agreement (NARBA) of December 1937 and its ratification by the Mexican Congress three years later (1940). At the end of March 1941, the government derogated the licenses of the border stations and expropriated them; in return, the U.S. gave Mexico six class 1-A clear-channel frequencies, at 730, 800, 900, 1050, 1220 and 1570 kilocycles (North American, 1968-76:503-17). In 1943 XEAW was shut down by the Mexican authorities, who transferred the use of its radio frequency to Monterrey station, which retained the Reynosa station's call letters (Green, 2010).

Although NARBA did not put an effective end to the establishment and operation of border blaster stations until the North American Broadcasting Agreement of 1986<sup>13</sup> the hillbilly and cowboy singers' performances on such stations during the "classic" period of the 1930's and early 1940's helped set the course for the continued growth in popularity of country music in later decades.

### Conclusions:

The boost which the border blaster stations gave to "hillbilly" country singers and their respective groups was partly owing to the location of the radio transmitters in Mexican territory

and the extraordinary power of their equipment and, secondly, the growing popularity of such music with radio audiences.

During the initial years of broadcasting, it was found that hillbilly music, previously perceived by the cultured urban public as unsophisticated and marginal as a musical form, had a much larger and diversified market potential than previously thought. Hillbilly music and advertising also harmonized; the inclusion of this type of music on the radio helped to sell products --primarily food and so-called “medicines”-- even if, from a professional medical point of view, the latter had very little or no curative powers. The border blaster entrepreneurs, many of whom had prior experience with radio broadcasting and the inclusion of hillbilly music as part of the programming, repeated their success with this same formula in their border radio operations.

Since it was more economical for stations of the period to hire hillbilly artists themselves than invest in stocks of records to play over the air, the music performed by the Carter Family and other notable performers on the border blaster stations was live. In addition, because the border blaster entrepreneurs were wealthy and had large reserves of capital, they could afford the best in contemporary broadcasting technology and equipment. Such factors served to enhance the performance of these artists on the air and also their popularity for listening audiences.

As time went on, the pressures of work and the demand for their songs and music compelled the artists to increasingly rely on transcription disks for transmitting their music from stations both on the border or in the interior of both countries. Transcription recording of their works --much of which remained existent only in this format-- helped to further increase their popularity with listeners. Although data is lacking it is possible that transcription recordings helped to popularize hillbilly music much more than the live performances themselves.

One final aspect of the border blaster legacy was the fact that the combination of country and Mexican musical programming helped stimulate a mutual appreciation of both these musical styles in the U.S. and Mexico, which, particularly in the case of country music, would prove to be an additional input to its development. Future research into this particular aspect of musical transculturation will undoubtedly produce much more insight concerning this question.

#### Notes:

1. On 10 December 1927 the program's name was changed to “Grand Ole Opry”. Wolfe, 1999:4-153.
2. Music record sales in general, however, dropped off notably from about 1924 on, due to the easy listening availability of music on the radio stations. They declined even more sharply with the onset of the Great Depression. Malone, 1985:95.
3. In the case of Canada, the FCC later authorized a certain number of free frequencies for Canadian broadcasting stations. Douglas, 1987:96.
4. The operations involved transplanting the thyroid, pituitary and pineal glands from goat kids to humans.
5. Among Mexican investors in the venture were Valdés' brother, Valeriano, and Lizandro Peña,

Mexican consul in Del Río. Leon E. Briset to Roy Campbell, 22 September 1931, together with a letter from Frank Dow to H.C. Johnson, 26 October 1931, and the letter from the director of Customs at Del Río to Roy Campbell, 6 May 1931, in USDA, MIA, 812.70, Brinkley, documents 8 and 46.

6. This contrasted notably with U.S. stations which were limited to a maximum of 50,000 watts. Brinkley claimed that his station waves reached, in addition to the U.S., 15 other countries.

7. KCKB regular employees included a “cowboy orchestra” and yodelers (Wood, 1934:212). Among hillbilly musicians who played at the station was the fiddler Bob Larkan. Brinkley also made use of a hillbilly band in his two successive bids for governor of Kansas in 1930 and 1932. Russell, 2007:124-26.

8. The Pickards remained a popular group and also appeared in Hollywood films and television.

9. The deal to perform on XERA was arranged between Ralph Peer, the Victor recording executive who served as their manager throughout their career, and Harry O'Neill, advertising agent for Consolidated. Kahn, 1996:208-09.

10. Following their stint at XERA, the group's fortunes declined. In 1939 A.P. and Sara divorced and the group finally disbanded in the spring of 1943.

11. One of Azcárraga's favorite tunes was reputedly Texas country singer Al Dexter's “Pistol Packin' Mama”, which he thought that both Mexicans and Americans could understand or identify with.

12. The equipment of XENT was similar to that of XER (XERA), with two 300 foot towers, a 150,000 watt transmitter powered by 1,340-hp diesel engines. Though not a licensed physician, Baker also opened up a cancer clinic in Nuevo Laredo since the American Medical Association had already effectively shut down his previous hospital in Muscatine, Iowa.

13. This accord, which permitted both Mexican and U.S. broadcasters to use the other country's clear-channel frequencies for low-powered stations in the evening, allowed the signals of the border stations to be drowned out in many communities by local broadcasts.

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