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NASHVILLE SKYLINE: Reissued Flatt & Scruggs Shows Are Jewels

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Tonight, I'm torn between dwelling on country music's legacy and its uncertain future. I'm listening to and watching the first-available DVDs of the vintage Flatt & Scruggs TV shows from long ago. And I'm at the same time reading online that Apple's Steve Jobs is positing what may be the only workable solution to breaking through the logjam of downloading music and thus preserving the future of the music industry.

To backtrack, for an object lesson, Jobs saved the record industry's ass in 2003 when he developed iTunes at a time when the music industry couldn't fathom a way out of its morass of not being able to face and deal with the dilemma of downloading songs or not downloading songs. The industry did nothing. Jobs said downloading could work with iTunes. It worked.

The labels learned nothing from that lesson and continued to stonewall efforts at wholesale and effortless downloading of songs and albums. Their big hang-up now is DRM (digital rights management), the techie method of basically preventing you from ever making a copy of anything that you legally download and pay for. The labels don't want you to be able to copy anything for any reason whatsoever. Steve Jobs, in an open letter to the industry, is now saying the ability to make copies may be the final solution to legal downloading and that he will do that on Apple's iTunes if the labels will cooperate. I doubt that they will do so.

CD sales are terminally down. There are no foreseeable solutions to that. No label

chiefs are commenting on the crisis or how to address it. Country retail CD sales are likewise obviously in the toilet. Everyone's waiting to see how Tim McGraw's new album in March will do, to see if it will re-invigorate the country market. But the problem goes beyond an immediate McGraw fix. CD sales overall are dwindling. They have to be replaced with something if the music industry is to survive. How? Country downloads are not filling the void. What to do? Well, that's the industry's problem.

Meanwhile, journey back with me to a warm wonderland in the early 1960s of the aroma of piping hot Martha White cornbread and biscuits cooking in the oven and the sound of ringing Flatt & Scruggs bluegrass tunes. The first two DVD releases of *Best of the Flatt & Scruggs TV Show*, better known as *Now You Bake Right: Flatt & Scruggs Television Shows, Sponsored by Martha White* are being released by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Shanachie Entertainment on March 27. Vol. 1 and Vol. 2 each contain two half-hour programs. More are expected later this year. Thirty-six shows in all have been discovered. For years, they were thought to have not survived -- such was the early mentality in television that shows were discarded and not preserved.

One of the most astonishing things about these DVD releases is seeing Flatt & Scruggs' obvious joy in getting into a new wonderland of getting their music to their fans. At the time, as Scruggs has recalled, the band quickly discovered that television was obviously better than touring, for many reasons. And the bluegrass band relished in being on TV. Genial lead singer Lester Flatt loved his role as spokesman, and Scruggs obviously doted on being spotlighted as the instrumental virtuoso.

And each half-hour program is a little jewel highlighting Flatt & Scruggs songs, joky host patter, folksy Martha White recipes presented by a Martha White babe (in a gingham dress), an earnest gospel song by the Foggy Mountain Gospel Quartet (made up of Scruggs and Flatt and mandolin player Curly Seckler and fiddler Paul Warren), cornpone humor, virtuoso picking by Scruggs on both banjo and guitar and by Josh Graves on Dobro, such guest artists as Mother Maybelle Carter and just a general country good time.

The shows are in black-and-white and show the group to be every bit as confident and authoritative as I recall them being.

Flatt & Scruggs never met Steve Jobs, obviously. But if they had met, they would have recognized themselves as brothers-in-arms. For they had a common goal: to dominate their market and leave a mark. And they both did so.