

# **THE COLLEGE TIMES**

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Country music, when it's played right and played well, is a style that manages to be highly emotional, nostalgic, rowdy and fun. It's a deceptive music: deep inside the tales of loss, drinking, the open road and God, is a virtuosity that only comes from the love of playing, and the desire to be as good as possible.

Country music, in its purest form, is no different from punk rock: the defining aspect of good country music is its rebellious nature. Three recent releases illustrate how great country music can be, and how it's that rebellious streak in the music and the players that makes it great.

Capitol has recently reissued 10 of Merle Haggard's earliest releases. Originally released between 1967 and 1971, these albums established Haggard as a great songwriter, musician and singer. While his songs, an almost even mix of ballads and rousing honky-tonk numbers, hew to the typical themes of love, loss, prison, drinking and roaming, they also show a man ignoring the sound of his time in favor of a sound and style he was comfortable playing.

The best example of this, and the best of the reissues, is his classic *Mama Tried*, here coupled with *Pride In What I Am*. (All of these reissues pair two albums in chronological order) Haggard's Bakersfield style of honky-tonk, melding acoustic instruments with electric guitars, gives these songs a simple rhythm and blues sound that highlights the lyrical themes. But what makes this album so great is its context: it's an album recorded in 1967 that almost completely ignores its time. Sure, there's a rock element to the music, but it's a rock sound more indebted to Elvis and Buddy Holly than the Stones and The Who. Haggard's songs are simple, always rooted firmly in the country music of his past. In this way, Haggard would solidify his place as a rebel, yes, for his prison background and lyrical themes, but also for a musical vision that refused to cower to the pressures of pop culture of his time.

Similar to Haggard in his refusal to modernize is Shooter Jennings. Jennings, like his father Waylon before him, revels in his rebel image. Make no mistake, Shooter works hard to portray the country outlaw on his just released *Electric Rodeo*, with songs that focus more on making trouble than making love. And yet, it's his music that makes him more of an outlaw. Here, like his debut album, Shooter's as much a southern rocker as a country kid. But unlike his contemporaries, Shooter keeps his country and his rock raw sounding. Nowhere is there a hint of pop sheen; nowhere does Shooter cave to the hit making machinery of Nashville. And while it may be easy to knock him for his tales of booze, pot, parties and women as so much cliché, it isn't easy to call his sound typical: there just isn't anybody nowadays willing to put so much rawness in their country music.

But it may be legend Kris Kristofferson that has put out the most rebellious country album this year. On *This Old Road*, Kristofferson reclaims his throne as the greatest hippie in country music. Like his classic debut *Kristofferson*, *This Old Road* finds the 70-year old questioning the country and society around him. Backed primarily by his acoustic guitar and harmonica, Kristofferson sings sad and beautiful songs about aging, God, family, friends and freedom. Freedom is difficult, something that people are punished for when they exert it, but something always worth aiming to achieve.

Since Kristofferson began writing and recording in the 1960s, freedom has been a central theme of his music. On his newest, he forces his listeners to examine their own feelings about the importance of freedom and what it truly means. It is a difficult album, especially on the emotional centerpiece “In the News,” but it is worth listening to over and over, both for its musical beauty, as well as its bravery. Very few veterans, with the exception of the late Johnny Cash, have the rebellious streak to do whatever they want. This is not an album for the conservative and closed minded, musically or politically.

What these three recent releases show is just how great country music has always been, and continues to be. With releases like these, it’s hard to ignore the one aspect that contributes to all the other great aspects of the genre: its rebel soul. No matter who you are, whether you like punk, indie rock, metal, country, even hip-hop (I love all of those styles, and more), when you hear good country music, it’s hard to ignore.