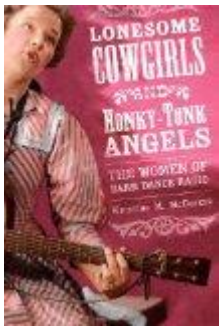
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kristine M. McCusker. *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. Plates. xi + 194 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07524-7.

Reviewed by Stacy Spaulding

Published on Jhistory (November, 2008)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University)

The New-Time Commercialism of Old-Time Radio

If you grew up in the South like I did, sitting cross-legged on the living room floor while the grandparents watched *Hee-Haw* or the *Grand Ole Opry*, you won't be able to resist the winsome title of this book, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*. Author Kristine M. McCusker presents here a collective biography of eight radio performers that also outlines a cultural history of early industry practices in country music and radio.

McCusker, an assistant professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University, first wrote about this subject in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (2004), a book she coedited with Diane Pecknold. In one of the book's essays, McCusker wrote about radio performer Linda Parker's on-stage image as a wholesome mountain girl and a singer of Southern ballads, an image that reinforced a middle-class gender ideology of purity and tradition. McCusker returns to the subject in her new work and expands it to include the lives of other early female radio performers.

After initially examining barn dance radio's early roots in vaudeville and Appalachian "local-color writers," McCusker focuses each chapter of *Lonesome Cowgirls* on a different performer and the unique way she helped build the genre of country music and barn dance radio. McCusker writes that LuLu Belle Wiseman's deployment of the sentimental mother stereotype was key to building a relationship with a larger audience as National Barn Dance Radio experimented with commercial practices and transcended regional programming. The yodeling sales pitches of the Golden Girls of the West, Milly and Dolly Good, blended entertainment and sponsorship into a modern "soft sell" that masqueraded as homage to simpler times. "Banjo Pickin' Girl" Lily Mae Ledford's performance at the White House for British royalty in 1939, alongside black performers, such as Marian Anderson, illustrates the challenges in-

herent in the Roosevelts' attempts to create a new national identity that transcended such social conflicts as racism.

Furthermore, the career of Sarah Colley Cannon (whose on-stage persona was Minnie Pearl, the old-maid mountain girl comedienne) provides a fascinating look at how one performer blended her on- and off-stage personas, despite their differences in class and circumstances. The career of Rose Lee Maphis demonstrates the genre's transition from national appeal back to regional radio and diminished audiences. Finally, McCusker examines the similarities between these women and one of the most famous female country stars to come later, Loretta Lynn, and suggests that her career and on-stage persona were molded by the women who came before her.

McCusker's sources include *Grand Ole Opry* archival material, oral interviews that she conducted, other unpublished recordings, and even one woman's handwritten autobiography. A dominant theme of the book is its examination of the relationship between stereotypical rural imagery (such as the independent cowgirl or the ballad-crooning sentimental mother) and the commercial demands of appeasing show sponsors, audiences, and managers. "Performers walked a minefield between portraying rural images on stage and the modern business routines that supported them," she writes (p. 3). Yet these women were successful, McCusker argues, because their stage personas concealed commercial pitches, provided a diversion from the financial straits of the Great Depression, and helped create a new national identity, all while providing what fans perceived as a "wholesome" alternative to the "demoralizing" encroachment of jazz.

If a fault is to be found with this book, it is perhaps that McCusker occasionally makes an assumption that is not grounded in the evidence presented. Drawing on an oral interview she conducted with Maphis, for example, McCusker discusses management practices and asserts that "women found subtle ways to mute that exploitation, devices so subtle that Maphis did not remember using them" (p. 134). If Maphis did not remember using them, do we know they commonly happened? At another point in the book, McCusker quotes at length from the letter of an audience member asking Wiseman not to sing any jazz. McCusker concludes, "Here, jazz represented the interracial mingling of whites and blacks, which LuLu Belle hinted at when she sang jazz" (p. 64). This statement may have validity, but it is drawn from assumptions that are not made explicit by the quoted portion of the letter.

There are few published works on the women of country music history (a search of the University of Maryland statewide library found only five books that specifically addressed the topic). ***Lonesome Cowgirls*** fills this empty space nicely with an approach that is not just biographical, but also grounded in a contemporary emphasis on the history of public images, popular culture, race, class, and gender. Teachers of broadcast history will find that the themes in this book resonate with cultural histories of women and radio, such as ***Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*** by Michele Hilmes (1997). Indeed, ***Lonesome Cowgirls*** provides a complementary (though more narrowly focused) perspective to Hilmes's profiles of radio pioneers and her examination of the ways stereotypical images both concealed and exposed existing power hierarchies.

At the very least, this book may give readers a new appreciation for the country variety shows that are still successful today, such as ***Prairie Home Companion***, in which storyteller Garrison Keillor masterfully deploys the stereotype of the Norwegian bachelor farmer for laughs while revering his old-time values. Listen closely and you might hear Minnie Pearl, the ***Grand Ole Opry***'s old maid gossip, giggling too.

“

”

: The Women of Barn Dance Radio

is

. She

-

–

–

such

-

.

A

seems to

Rose Lee

Rose

Rose

Lulu Belle

and Honky-Tonk Angels

would

"

"