

Rick's Place
Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience
by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

Country music is just three chords and the truth.
Harlan Howard

Sometimes it is the simplest stories that make the greatest impact. The finest writing is often the simplest and most direct. Many of us see beauty in zen koans. Haiku has fascinated readers for centuries. The starter for this piece appeared in an Emmylou Harris special called "The Ten Commandments of Country". One of the statements she made, after proffering that they really should be "suggestions" not commandments was that, "If love didn't hurt, there'd be no country music."

We might extend that idea to other types of music. If we think back to some of the memorable moments in our lives, the pain of a lost love or unrequited love or a broken heart will probably be present somewhere. Think of the songs that you have sung or performed where the subject or theme has been the pain of love dying or growing without reciprocation. Listen to the songs of John Jacob Niles, then bring out *The Silver Swan*. In studying the music of Appalachia, home of the roots of what today is called "classic" country music, he found links through images and language to the Elizabethan English poets.

Now the aural distance between "I Wonder As I Wander" and "Achy Breaky Heart" also tells a story of an urbanisation and transformation of an acoustic art and the people who perform and listen to it. In a gentler world we might say that the growth of the symphonic ensemble followed a similar path as it went from gut strings to wound. As the world grew noisier, the music grew louder as well. Much of modern day country is coloured with the twang of the electric guitar and the throb of drums. Blame or thank the Bobs - Wills and Dylan. From the big-band boogie of Texas swing to the electrification of folk music, the times, they were (and are) a-changin'.

The three chords provide the structure. Same three as the blues and many hymns and patriotic songs. We've all learned them. There is usually an image in the words that catches the ear of the composer. When we think of love, that love need not be limited to the romantic ideal, but may also include the love of beauty and sometimes the disappointment that pursuit of love can create. Take the following:

Songbird in a golden cage: She'd prefer the blue. How I crave the liquor of her song.
Poor bird who has done no harm: What harm could she do? She shall be my prisoner her life long.
My songbird wants her freedom: Now don't you think I know.
But I can't find it in myself, To let my songbird go:
I just can't let her go.

Jesse Winchester's lyric, sung recently on *Spyboy* by Emmylou Harris, has the same swing between sweet and sour; happy and sad; and pride and disappointment that marks much of our journey through the world. The composers of art songs from every era have played the same balancing game. We each recognise our self in the singer and in that recognition, the humanity we share. Labels will get in the way: a simple melody, well sung or played will conjure up all the beauty that a heart can hold.

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