

The Flying Burrito Bros.

Mike Kerman

1969

A few weeks ago the Flying Burrito Brothers brought their electrified, rockified country style music to the Grande Ballroom and the good folks responded with a silent Bronx cheer.

They wanted something familiar to vibrate their nervous systems, but the Burritos responded with soft, but apparently unsoothing country rock.

While the Burritos' roots are country, they aren't a country music band. They are using the music that is most natural to them, as well as utilizing rock's musical innovations of the past few years and their own personal dope-filled experiences.

In the area of "national music," the United States has two major contributions. The first, and currently most popular, is the blues (actually not really American, but with strong roots in African music).

Pop record buyers, top-40 radio stations, and teenyboppers became aware of the blues, not by the wealth of talent in their cities and country, but by English imports—the Stones, Mayall, Animals, etc. and then by American groups like Canned Heat.

It seems ironic that the creators of the blues go begging, while their students, conscientious as they are, reap the benefits.

Blues is definitely "in" now—it's selling records (Columbia recently signed Johnny Winter for a \$300,000 contract), and a good percentage of new groups are blues groups. Everybody's got those low down, sometimes psychedelic, bell-bottom trouser blues.

But the only really American music as the only originally American instrument is the banjo—is country music.

Country music, whether "old timey" like the New Lost City Ramblers or Doc Watson; bluegrass like Flatt and Scruggs (who just disbanded), or country and western like Hank Williams, has never been really popular outside of the South.

Especially for the turned-on now generation, who thumb their noses at the unrefined sound, maudlin lyrics, and nasal vocalists who provoke an image of a George Wallace rally.

This whole substantial and fertile area of music was left virtually untouched as rock artists went elsewhere to diversify their sound—classical, electronic, Indian, and a wide range of sounds were tested as most musicians had either a talent or curiosity about those forms. "Folk-rockers" sometimes hinted at country, but preferred to stay away.

As with the shift from folk to rock, it was Bob Dylan who was somewhat responsible for the new-found interest in country.

While other groups like Hearts and Flowers and The Dillards tried to upbeat country, it was "John Wesley Harding" that brought the Byrds, Judy Collins, Leonard Cohen and others down to Nashville, and has started a small scale revival that is the freshest thing happening in a rather stale period in rock music.

The Flying Burrito Brothers' album, "The Gilded Palace of Sin," (on A&M) is out, and we can hear the best synthesis of rock and country music yet.

While the Byrds' "Sweetheart of the Rodeo" and The Dillards' "Wheatstraw Suite" are beautiful, albums that utilize electric music and good studio techniques, the Burritos are the first group that combine the harmonics and musical complexity of country with the hardness and balls of good rock.

Gram Parsons, their lead singer, keyboards and rhythm guitarist, was raised in Georgia, turned on to music by early local favorites, Elvis Presley; went to Harvard; took acid, dropped out, and started the International Submarine Band, the first freeks to play country music.

When they broke up he met Chris Hillman, an original Byrd. Hillman, who actually started playing the mandolin with a California group at 16, got bored with the Byrds, and now is doing what he really wants to do with the Burritos. Hillman and Parsons write and sing almost all of their material.

Chris Etheridge, of Meridian, Mississippi, who "cried and cried" when Hank Williams died, has a drawl that would put Sen. Stennis to shame. As bassist, he livened up Judy Collins' latest album, and adds talent and taste to the Burritos.

Sneaky Pete is older (around 30), quiet, but plays a mean pedal steel guitar. The pedal steel, looks like a little stringed coffee table and makes a twangy, winsome, but powerfully electric rich sound.

Country music often sings of social injustice, inequities, and personal misfortunes with a sense of humor. The Burritos do likewise in "My Uncle" about a draft dodger, "Hippie Boy," about a kid killed by our blue-cloaked love-in buddies in Chicago during the Dem. convention, and "Sin City" about Los Angeles' future date with the Pacific (it's really "God's punishment" say the Burritos).

"The Gilded Palace of Sin" is an unusual album, as country "purists" might object to its hard rock sound and unaccustomed rock ears might be turned off by its country influence. But given a while, people hopefully will accept the tradition that brought the Burritos to where they are.

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