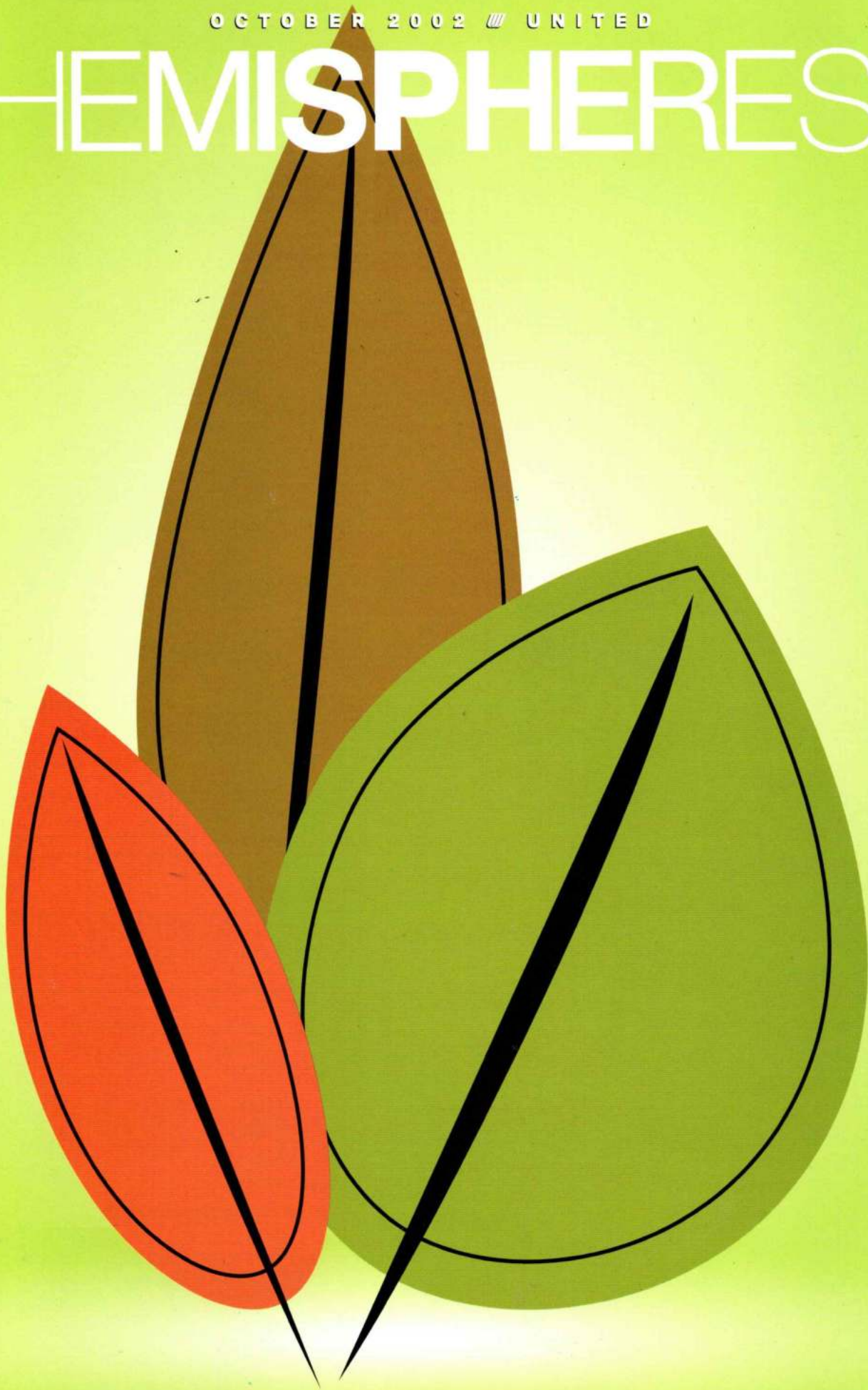


OCTOBER 2002 // UNITED

HEMISPHERES





By Todd Jarrell | Photography by Thomas Petillo

COMPANY *town*



Tuned In

THE LOOPY BLUE NEON LETTERS SPELL OUT "ROBERT'S WESTERN World." Atop the sign stands an 8-foot-tall, no-nonsense brown cowboy boot; inside, the band is playing tunes from another time. Songs

Nashville was polishing and packaging country music to death. Then the raw, old-time soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* won the Grammy for best album and sold 6 million copies. These days, even Nashville is celebrating country's re-emerging roots.

drift into the street: throaty, yodeled laments set to a honky-tonk shuffle that could inspire a dead man to shake a leg. On a long wall opposite the busy bar, backlit leather boots in orderly pairs line narrow shelves that climb above the cocktail tables. They seem as if they might at any moment kick up their heels and begin clogging to some supernatural

choreography: Ray Price meets *Riverdance*. ¶ Jesse Lee Jones, from São Paulo, Brazil, is the bandleader tonight. Affixed to his chrome microphone stand is a thin, vertical placard emblazoned with the ▶

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band's name, The Brazilbillies. Jesse is doing his part to make the audience feel right at home, a courtesy that extends to apprising one and all that "the restrooms were cleaned and disinfected for your comfort today." And while this curious public service announcement is delivered tongue-in-cheek, many inside Robert's Western World can remember a time not too long ago when a clean toilet would have been a unique selling point here on Nashville's Lower Broadway club scene.

By 1990, blood-bucket bars and porn parlors had drained the life from this once-vibrant street. But in the past decade this stretch of Broadway, like the city surrounding it, has launched quite a comeback. Standing in front of Robert's and surveying the avenue, you can sense a flourishing city.

Four blocks north is the Cumberland River, the trade artery that was the *raison d'être* of Nashville before country music even had a name, much less its own 24-hour cable channel. Across its languid surface sits the colossal Adelphi Stadium, home of the Tennessee Titans, Nashville's new NFL team. On the nearer bank can be found brick-and-mortar monuments to the city's rediscovered self-esteem: the Bell South Tower (known by locals as "the Batman Building" for its cowed face and distinctive twin antennae), the Nashville Public Library, the Gaylord Entertainment Center (where the Nashville Predators take on all NHL comers), the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, and the brand-new Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

City fathers drained the swamp of vice, so to speak, bringing Lower Broadway onto higher ground. Not that this famed stretch is "dry" by any means; bars are still clustered along these few blocks almost end to end. While some of the more high-concept venues like Planet Hollywood and NASCAR Café have ▶

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been boarded up, the street is dotted with survivors who've played memorable roles in the development of country music. Established in 1879, Hatch Show Print still prints, by hand, provincial posters and retro show bills from carefully carved wooden plates. The Ernest Tubb Record Shop—which once boasted in-store appearances on WSM-AM radio's Midnite Jamboree by the likes of Elvis Presley, Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, and Willie Nelson—still tracks down obscure recordings for obsessive clients around the world.

Just "three doors down and a two-step away" from Robert's is Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, one of Nashville's holiest sites. Both the establishment and its namesake are legendary. Original owner Tootsie Bess played surrogate mom to generations of fledgling musicians and writers, offering a sympathetic ear and the occasional cash loan. It's said that a young and impoverished Willie Nelson once ran from the bar, prostrating himself on a snow-laden Broadway in hopes of ending his troubles beneath any random vehicle. (It never came; Willie got up, brushed himself off, and went on to do pretty well for himself.) Today Tootsie's walls are chock-a-block with smoke-basted publicity photos, a gallery of the famous and the forgotten.

Tootsie's owes its aura to its proximity to the red-brick Ryman Auditorium, whose stage door is across the alleyway. Originally dedicated in 1892 as the Union Gospel Tabernacle, the Ryman found its true calling in 1943 as the home of WSM's live country music program, the Grand Ole Opry. This 50,000-watt broadcast was the minaret from which the country music faithful were summoned each week from dozens of surrounding states. In honor of its profound importance to the history of the genre, the Ryman is affectionately

referred to as the "Mother Church of Country Music."

But with an eye to the bottom line, the corporate owners of the Grand Ole Opry moved the show in 1974 to its new facility at Opryland USA—an amusement park-turned-shopping mall. Left vacant, the Ryman nearly fell before the blade of "progress" and was saved only when a shocked citizenry came to its rescue. Then the same multimedia company that almost allowed that particular travesty to occur announced that it was considering changing WSM's decades-old country format to syndicated sports talk. Again fans took to the streets and protested while historians, the media, and stars past and present wrung their hands. The company relented, and for now we still get to hear the Grand Ole Opry every week, broadcast live on WSM-AM, its radio home since 1927.

JUST ACROSS I-40 FROM DOWNTOWN Nashville stands the six-block epicenter of the country music business: Music Row. Guitar slingers from around the world vector through, cold-calling label executives, serenading secretaries at the reception desk, and singing in front of souvenir shops. The desperate have been known to pitch their songs to captive producers in toilet stalls and even to walk down Music Row naked in search of the faintest of fickle attentions. Most gain little more than a whole new catalogue of miseries to draw upon for their songwriting. But for those who treat it as a business, who network the jam sessions, dodge the grifters, and practice their craft tirelessly for years (only to be deemed an overnight success), the rewards can be significant. One hit song can be worth millions of dollars. Everyone knows this—and no one knows it better than the record companies who make Music Row their home.

During the 1980s, the country music business was doing a decent enough job of holding on to its core audience, but that audience wasn't growing—except, alas, in age. In the absence of its own superstars to challenge Michael Jackson, Prince, and U2, Nashville had little choice but to cede the most desirable demographic—young adults living in urban and suburban areas—to other genres.

Then, in the decade's final moments, a savior emerged: Garth Brooks. Armed with a marketing degree and a stage presence that borrowed more heavily from arena rock than the Ryman, Brooks reanimated the entire country music business, outselling not only every artist in country music history but also crossing over to the pop charts and dominating them in an unprecedented manner. His special blend of two parts twang to one part middle-of-the-road pop was the magic bullet. It satisfied country fans while it brought in millions of new listeners who had grown up with '60s- and '70s-style rock but didn't connect with newer artists. Country music had always had its Merle Haggards and Loretta Lynns, and they were just fine. But it had always wanted its own Elvis, its own Beatles. Garth Brooks and his winning formula gave Music Row exactly what it was pinning for.

The only problem with winning formulas, of course, is that they're formulas. For many years before the arrival of Garth Brooks, the mandarins of Music Row had been floundering, unsure of which sound to pursue. Should they cultivate artists who were working in the classic country tradition (and in some cases, boldly experimenting with that tradition), or should they water down the hallmark elements of country music and bring it even closer, stylistically, to mainstream pop?

When Brooks exploded onto the ▶

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scene, there was really no longer any debate: The pop-leaning partisans were triumphant. Immediately, the race was on to repeat the performance, leading to the construction of a new Music Row assembly line that manufactured, processed, and released a steady stream of acts—disparagingly referred to as “hat acts,” since their cowboy hats were meant to be seen as proof of their C&W authenticity—designed to build on Brooks’ pop-friendly momentum. Classicists and innovators, meanwhile, were lumped together as “fringe” acts unlikely to draw large audiences and were exiled to the industry’s periphery.

When the pendulum swung back again, as it always must, Garthmania—

Country music has always been about the words. In its tales of cheating and remorse, of impossible yearning and heroic drinking, we recognize our twin capacities for heartbreak and rebirth.

and sales of country albums in general—leveled off amidst cooling passions for the genre. Market share went down, and the number of country stations nationwide plummeted. The industry’s response to the post-Garth slump was that it had to discover “fresh” talent. But what Music Row really wanted was “safe” talent: stars who didn’t veer too far from the Magic Formula, acts who would be able to keep the pop-minded fans from defecting.

Meanwhile, the country music exiles were busy plotting their revolution. Bands like BR5-49, who took their name from a skit on the cornpone TV variety show *Hee-Haw* and their sound from the classic country canon, were packing them in every weekend at Robert’s Western World, appealing to young fans who yearned for an unadulterated sound built on foundations laid by Hank Thompson, Buck Owens, and George Jones. A transplanted California girl named Gillian

Welch became an overnight success and critical darling with the release of her debut album, a stark and moving collection of mainly acoustic songs that evoked the plaintive ballads of the Carter Family. Artists who had been shunned by Music Row for daring to defy stereotypes—singer-songwriters like Steve Earle and Lucinda Williams—were receiving love letters from highbrow music critics and racking up Grammy nominations.

Even bona fide establishment figures like Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson were wriggling out of Nashville’s stylistic straitjacket, recording highly personal, idiosyncratic albums full of daring material. By the mid-1990s, these maverick artists and their country-leaning cousins

from the rock ‘n’ roll world had coalesced to form a genre known as “alternative country” that seemed,

paradoxically, far closer to country’s roots as simple, direct music of the people than anything coming out of Music Row.

The apotheosis of alternative country came in early 2002, when the soundtrack for the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* took home the Grammy for best album in addition to several others. The Coen brothers’ movie, a quirky retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey*, had been a hit with critics but was by no means a box-office blockbuster. But the soundtrack sold 6 million units, mainly via word of mouth and with very little airplay. The album’s blend of bluegrass, old-time gospel, and proto-country turned out to be the surprise smash hit of 2001. The American public was clearly hungry for country music rooted in traditions older than the slick quasi-country of Garth Brooks.

THE SUCCESS OF THE *O BROTHER* SOUNDTRACK and the popularity of the insurgent

alternative-country movement have, at least temporarily, captured the attention of Music Row. Whether the suits in charge respond by embracing the “roots” mentality or move even further toward a shiny hybrid of country and pop is anyone’s guess. But regardless, there will always be at least a few Nashville nightspots dedicated to honoring traditions.

One such spot is the Bluebird Café, providing what owner Amy Kurland says is the “public voice of the private experience” of songwriting. It’s not easy to get onstage at the Bluebird. Kurland has a reputation for being opinionated, even intractably so, but she’s beloved for the enthusiasm she brings to the job of showcasing established writers as well as deserving up-and-comers. (Her club is now featured in a weekly television show, *Live From the Bluebird Café*, which airs on the Turner South network.)

It’s on Kurland’s stage and in other Nashville venues like Third and Linsley, Twelfth and Porter, Douglas Corner, and The Sutler that one hears country songs stripped down to their barest essentials: a few chords tied together by a shimmering hook and carrying lyrics of love and loss, despair and redemption. Country can be dance music, sure, but at its heart it’s always been about the words. In its tales of cheating and remorse, of impossible yearning and heroic drinking, we recognize our twin capacities for heartbreak and rebirth. Country lyrics are the proletarian poetry of rural America.

It’s poetry, but it’s still a business. Some Nashville publishers cluster songwriters in tiny cubicles around coffee machines, where they look far more like office workers than artists. Writers keep appointment books, tying their creative output to the clock. Some of them pitch melodies and lyrics designed to echo a targeted artist’s last hit—a dismal spiral.

To understand the identity crisis that’s

currently afflicting Nashville, compare the hillbilly noir of "O Death" (a Ralph Stanley dirge from the *O Brother* soundtrack that's about as "old country" as it gets) with almost anything by Shania Twain, the pouting, midriff-baring diva of New Country. It's like comparing white lightning with Listerine. There's nothing inherently wrong with exposing one's bellybutton. But until recently Music Row and country radio seemed bent on divorcing themselves from the genre's diversity and roots and thus from a considerable fan base hungering for acts of credibility and substance—artists with something to say as well as something to sell. *O Brother* changed everything. The music was ancient and unsexy, and the public ate it up.

BACK AT ROBERT'S WESTERN WORLD the ceiling fans blend a thick mix of cigarette smoke and hamburger-scented haze. The Brazilillies honor most but not all requests. Jesse has drawn a line in the grime, unilaterally declaring Robert's Western World a "No-Garth Zone."

Even though he was raised on the saucy *chorinho* music of his native country, Jesse has come a long way to make this U.S. music his own. Like many of the alternative-country acts who may have immigrated from the realms of folk, rock, or even punk, he's proof that the genre isn't about where you're from; it's about where you want to go.


Above the stage, the airbrushed faces of Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, Roy Acuff, Marty Robbins, and others hang over Jesse's shoulder like saints, blessing those who have worshipfully assembled this evening. In a region famous for evangelists, Jesse Lee Jones is proudly proselytizing. Motioning toward the alley, he acknowledges, "We're in the shadow of the mother church here. It gives me chills." Then, lest the mood

grow too solemn, he reminds both himself and the crowd, "But this isn't a church service. This is a honky-tonk service. Let's act accordingly!" The band launches into the next number.

The fiddle, emancipated, swoons and lifts giddily above the lush thump of the upright bass; dancers wheel and carom, and even those content "just to listen" can't help but tap their toes or heels and bounce in place. A plastic tip bucket

makes its way around the room as tangled arms lift upward, craning to release clutches of small bills. The band will play all night, taking no breaks, and will split the tips. They certainly won't amount to enough money to buy the fabled mansion on the hill. But no matter. Here, tonight, it's not about the money. /END/

Todd Jarrell is a frequent contributor to HEMISPHERES. He lives near Nashville.



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