

WHERE ARE THE COUNTRY GIRLS?

We head to Nashville in search of lesbians in the country music scene. By Stephanie Schroeder



Mary Gauthier



Michele Malone



Kitty Rose

Dreams of country music stardom have more than a handful of lesbians chasing audiences, playing gigs in every nook and cranny of the country and world, holding down day jobs or living an itinerant life and generally doing whatever it takes to achieve a modicum of success in and out of Nashville—only these gals are doing it lesbo style.

While some say that k.d. lang is responsible for the growing number of lesbian country music fans, London-based writer and artist Rosa Ainley, who, along with coauthor Sarah Cooper, wrote the 1994 essay “She Thinks I Still Care: Lesbians and Country Music,” posits the idea that lesbians have always listened to country—even if lang did help to spark the community’s collective interest in the genre.

“Country-western music outsold all other forms of music in the Western world during the 1990s,” says Ainley. “That says something about the broad audience for the genre.” Ainley declares that k.d. lang’s foray into country was more about theatrics than a desire for country music stardom.

And lang doesn’t disagree—completely. “Certainly for me it was about the theatrics, the performance, but I also approached it with an emotional integrity that doesn’t exist in other types of music,” says lang. “Country music to me is more guttural, or blue collar, in appearance and emotion, and that pleased me as a singer.” Lang says that country is one of her favorite musical genres and that fans can definitely expect another country album from her.

Though lang may have influenced some crossover fans, few, if any, queer women who are on the country scene today are as popular as lesbian icons Shelby Lynne and Terri Clark. Who knows if either is queer, but both certainly have a large lesbian following. Lynne’s *Just a Little Lovin’* tour, a tribute to Dusty Springfield, has only fueled interest in her and speculation about her sexuality among queer women.

Making it in Nashville is no easy task for anyone, and it’s been even harder for the few lesbian artists who’ve eked out a place for themselves



Mighty Slim Pickins

on the country scene. One of these is singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier, who has been working in Nashville since 2001 and has toured with Willie Nelson, John Prine, Cowboy Junkies and Nanci Griffith, among others, and was one of the first out lesbians to play the Grand Ole Opry. But Gauthier insists that for her, it’s more about the music than her sexuality.

“I’m working on being the greatest artist I can be. As a songwriter and storyteller I play to a primarily heterosexual audience...but I don’t care because I enjoy the opportunity. My songs are about the human condition, not the gay human condition,” says Gauthier.

Jen Foster is an out singer-songwriter who takes a different tack. Her first album, *The Underdogs*, came out in 2006 and, she says, uses the everpresent heartbreak and rejection of the country genre to tap into an expression of the turmoil of coming out in the ‘80s. Foster, who performed at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival this year, has garnered a faithful lesbian fanbase, partly due to the viral spread of her song “I Didn’t Just Kiss Her,” which was a send-up of Katy Perry’s “I Kissed A Girl.” Her newest album, *Thirty-Nine*, was released this year.

SENIOR MCGUIRE (GAUTHIER), TRISH LAND (MALONE), JESSE MERRILL (ROSE), ERIN O’NEIL (PICKINS)

MAKING TRACKS

Still, other out artists have moved away from the country scene in order to find their niche. Kristen Hall, of Sugarland fame, says that she moved to Nashville to write country songs, but instead has found that she feels more comfortable in the indie-folk scene.

“When I moved to Nashville, I took my personal freedom for granted, being out as a lesbian in Atlanta for 24 years and working for Amy and Emily [Ray and Saliers, respectively—the Indigo Girls]. But here in Nashville I am very shaken and saddened by how many musicians are in the closet and how many are floundering,” says Hall.

And there are other lesbian musicians, like Texas Hall-of-Famer Gretchen Phillips, whose output crosses genres: The lines blur between country, alt country, Americana, and folk; between bluegrass, rockabilly and country kitsch.

Moanin’ Michelle Malone, another example of a successful genre-crosser, has been touring for over a decade and logs about 200 days a year on the road. Her newest album, *Debris*, is a mix of belt-it-out blues, jazzy rock anthems and rockabilly-alt country train and pain songs. “I’m a rock chick with an edge,” says the Atlanta-born-and-bred songstress. “*Debris* has a little bit of everything—instead of a story, there are a lot of little stories that fit together and give a glimpse into a day in the life.”

Thrown into this mix are Kentucky-born, indie-Americana singer Ashleigh Flynn, a self-described late bloomer with four CDs under her belt. “I have a song called ‘Chokecherry’ inspired by *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Since I’m from in and around Kentucky, the stories of the South inform my songwriting as does the impact of racism,” says Flynn.

And no discussion of queer country music would be complete without a mention of Woody Simmons, a fixture in the bluegrass-rockabilly scene since the mid 1970s, and Emmylou Harris, whose album *Red Dirt Girl* was truly LGBT-inspired. Harris has been quoted as saying, “What really took it over the edge for me was on a night off in New Orleans we went to see *Boys Don’t Cry*. It unnerved me, not only because of the violence and homophobia, but also because of the underlying theme of how trapped those young people were. We all come into this world with so much potential and so many dreams.” Current Nashville-area singers Amelia White and Ann McCue, who toured and have an album with multiple Grammy Award-winner and country cult favorite Lucinda Williams, deserve credit as well.

For a different take on country, J. Byrd and the Tater Trio are a contemporary group playing classic country fronted by Jeanette “J. Byrd” Hosch, a hefty butch with short gray hair and a delicate voice that makes Dolly Parton’s ultrafeminine drawl sound like a jackhammer.

Then there are the outrageous Mighty Slim Pickins, whose eclectic “what-the-fuckabilly” sound confounds fans and transgresses all musical genres and gender stereotypes. Fronted by Dinette “Nettie” Hammar and Leigh Crowe, the Mighty Slim Pickins’ act is an homage to classic country duos such as Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner, Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash, and George Jones and Tammy Wynette: men with big voices and women with bigger hair.

“Serious classic country music fans are often in the LGBT community, but seen as the latch-key kids of the community,” says 2005 Outmusic Award-winner Kitty Rose. As an artist putting out music in the tradition of classic country acts like Loretta Lynn, Rose works small-town country fairs as well as large concert venues, and even Olivia cruises. This variety gives her insight into how vastly different crowds can connect to country. “I work county fairs where the crowd would be offended by all that,” she says. “But I also play San Francisco and L.A., and I can throw out all the innuendo I want, and they get it.” ■

“Take yourself seriously,” advises Meghan Toohey when asked about breaking into the male-dominated field of music production. “Be creative with what you have to work with. Listen to all different genres of music.”

It also helps that the Los Angeles-based musician is an incredibly talented multi-instrumentalist. Before touring the world with several renowned artists, including Lori McKenna, Schuyler Fisk, Lenka, Michelle Featherstone and Missy Higgins, she fronted her own band, the So and So’s, in her home state of Massachusetts, and also enjoyed success as a solo performer.

Toohey is currently gaining attention as the guitarist for the band the Weepies, but it is her production work for artists such as Rachael Cantu and Vivek Shraya that makes her stand out from the singer-songwriter crowd.

With Toohey’s success on both sides of the glass in the recording studio, it was surprising to discover that her education at the Berklee College of Music focused on song writing and voice, rather than guitar and recording. However, despite having never taken guitar lessons, Toohey was often asked to play for recording sessions in the Music Production and Engineering Department.

“Because there were so many virtuosic guitarists honing their chops there, I would tend to put down a few simple parts,” she explains. It was during those sessions that she learned about gear, the recording process and the importance of “less is more” arrangements.

But her less is more experience predates her education. “I’ve been messing around with a four-track recorder since I was a kid, so I learned basic knowledge of how to work with EQs, levels and effects early on,” she says. Armed with her recorder and a cheap microphone, Toohey would layer herself playing an out-of-tune piano and drumming on pots and pans to create mix tapes for friends. It’s no surprise that she cites the Beatles as an influence, marvelling at their ability to create such amazing sounds with so few tracks.

She may have an affinity for old-school simplicity, but it is modern technology that has advanced Toohey’s career as a record producer. After easily recording and emailing all her guitar parts for the Weepies’ albums from home, Toohey realized she could produce Canadian musician Vivek Shraya’s music by sending tracks back and forth from Los Angeles to Toronto.

“An artist usually brings me a song and I try out different arrangements and tones until, together, we get it right,” she explains when asked about her role as producer. “I either try and enhance their vision, or I create a sound for them that best suits their vibe and blends their influences.”

In addition to producing, she is also scoring music for film and TV, and is working on another release of her own music. “I’m also threatening to start a band called Lady Pants and the Boy Shorts that only plays female singer-songwriter covers and will dominate the Olivia cruise circuit,” Toohey adds, not taking herself too seriously. “Now booking all your lady-infused events!”

[Kyra Thompson]

