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‘At the Louisiana Hayride Tonight’ Review: Fame’s Feeder System

A massive boxed set collects recordings of the vaudeville-style radio show that helped launch musicians like Hank Williams, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash to stardom.

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Based in Shreveport, La.’s 3,800-seat Municipal Auditorium and broadcast by 50,000-watt KWKH radio from 1948-60, with some segments picked up for even wider audiences by CBS and Armed Forces Radio, “Louisiana Hayride” had a rambunctious style all its own. Chicago’s “National Barn Dance” and Nashville’s “Grand Ole Opry” had preceded it by decades, but this vaudeville-style show was born and thrived just as country music found mass acceptance, a commercial explosion it contributed to smashingly.

The three-hour Saturday-night show introduced commanding stars who became emblematic of the era— Hank Williams, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash among them. And it highlighted assertive rhythm-heavy flavors: country boogie, honky tonk and rockabilly. Its theme song, fittingly, was but a slight variation on the 19th-century singalong rouser “Gonna Raise a Ruckus Tonight.”

That theme is heard a good many times on “At the Louisiana Hayride Tonight,” a surprising and revealing boxed set from Bear Family Records that collects clean-sounding transcriptions of 25 hours of broadcasts across the show’s lifespan—167 performers and over 500 tracks included—plus some bonus recordings made under the same auspices in the years just before and after the regular broadcast run. Producer Martin Hawkins and executive producer Richard Wieze looked for performances and lineups that were among the most exciting and most representative, and transferred them with care, accompanied in the final set by the sort of detailed photo-, session- and artist information-rich book this collector label is known for.

The results, for anyone with the slightest taste for hardcore country music, are often thrilling. The Hayride’s management was inclined to give breaks to relatively untried newcomers, allowing them leeway to break out from prevailing performance styles, and it had the sense to recognize an original

when it encountered one. So listeners can catch great artists in the moments they were finding themselves, responding to the crowd's enthusiasm and becoming the electrifying performers they'd be: Hank Williams, after just a few recordings on a tiny independent label, tearing up the audience before he's had a single hit. Elvis Presley, soon after his famed first session at Sun Records, introducing his earliest rockabilly numbers sandwiched between others' hillbilly hoedown instrumentals and milder pop hits; you can hear the screaming ensue—and also several live numbers he didn't record at the time, such as the Clovers' "Little Mama."

There's honky tonker Webb Pierce modernizing old Jimmie Rodgers numbers; George Jones singing Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally"; Johnny Horton performing as his music evolved from the honky tonk of "One Woman Man" to the saga hit "Battle of New Orleans"; Johnny Cash and band stepping up their rhythm soon after their first recordings.

The Hayride was promoted as "The Cradle of the Stars" once it became clear how many of its discoveries were hitting it big and, very often, taking off for Nashville and the cast of the Opry. In 1951 alone, that trip was made by Kitty Wells, Slim Whitman, Mac Wiseman, Johnny & Jack, and Webb Pierce—all utterly distinctive acts, all with major national hits within months, and all lost to the Hayride. They're all heard on this set, as are a number of terrific country acts rarely recorded live, remembered best by completists and cultists (Frankie Miller, Merle Kilgore, Betty Amos, Jerry Jericho) and a few singers (such as the forgotten, smooth Jeanette Hicks) who will be true news for many.

Part of what gives these many involving hours of shows their distinct flavor is what they do not often highlight at all. Little heard here are bluegrass (characteristically, the hard-driving Jimmy Martin will eventually be the grasser they feature), cowboy crooners or quartets, gospel harmonizers, and old-time hillbilly stringbands.

Fatefully, there was something else the Louisiana Hayride didn't have—Nashville's infrastructure of music publishers, in-town recording studios and steadily aggressive booking agencies that would keep acts around and provide a steady stream of new material to perform. With its thrifty "Triple A ball" approach, the Hayride kept losing its best to the majors, hot new hits weren't coming out of Shreveport, and the CBS network dropped the show in 1958. In its last years, ironically enough, the attractions that brought audiences to the increasingly less-attended Municipal Auditorium were visiting Nashville stars—Roger Miller, Loretta Lynn, Roy Acuff. The Hayride era ended—but not before a remarkable amount of music was made, and with these fine live recordings we can experience that electricity for hours.

—*Mr. Mazor, based in Nashville, reviews country and roots music for the Journal*