Foreword

Henry Sapoznik

The history of country music is awash in a seemingly limitless supply of memorable “firsts”: the first commercial recording (1922), the first broadcast of the *Grand Ole Opry* (1925), the first singing cowboy movie (1930), among many others. But the first *book* to bring together the full panoramic sweep of country music in a well-written and closely observed unimpeachable work is in your hands. *Country Music USA* originated as a dissertation penned in 1965 by thirty-one-year-old Bill C. Malone in fulfillment of his doctorate in American History at the University of Texas, Austin.

Malone was born in 1934 on his family’s tenant farm, a lonely, hardscrabble outpost in rural Smith County—then East Texas cotton country—about twenty miles west of Tyler. Malone’s early and easygoing ownership of the received raft of traditional music came from his mother, Maude Owens Malone, who seamlessly rendered offerings from church hymnody as easily as those rescued from old songbooks and fragile, yellowed sheet music. This patchwork quilt of repertory—rendered in a stripped-down and practical style—placed the emerging historian of his southern folk culture immediately into the sturdy musical continuity of the traditional transmission of generations. Because the amenities of the Malone household differed little from a similar farm of the mid-nineteenth century, the arrival

in 1939 of a Philco battery radio overnight introduced the family to the outside world and to the radio hillbillies who helped them survive the exigencies of hard times. A flood of programs both day and night made passionate fans of his parents and older brothers, with young Bill soaking up the sound of dozens of earnest influences.

Malone's homegrown smooth and reliable singing style won him some local notoriety after he arrived at UT-Austin to pursue his studies. He even took up the guitar, not in any kind of hot licks plectrum style but with the traditional thumb/index strum, reminiscent of what was played in countless parlors, at parties, and on porches, a style he still resolutely plays today. But, had Malone not built upon a dissertation topic suggested by his professor, this cornerstone work may never have been written. The release of *Country Music USA* in 1968 came when Nashville, as the citadel of country music, was being challenged by new and growing grassroots audiences for bluegrass and old-time music and by other revivals such as Cajun and western swing. Evidence of this rise of interest in older forms of country music could also be found in the cottage industries of reissue LPs, specialty magazines, instruction books, and new traditional music festivals and contests. Lacking, however, was a unifying vision that brought all these styles—and their fascinating backstories—between two covers. Construction of an overarching ingathering of this confluence of movements called for a well-observed, well-analyzed, well-described, and compelling narrative. Such a work could best be accomplished by a disciplined scholar of cultural history, who just happened to be a product of that society.

What makes this book so resilient is Malone's equity as what anthropologists accurately, though inelegantly, refer to as a "participant-observer." As a participant, he is first and foremost a fan: a passionate carrier and conveyor of key moments in the life of country music. His own ironclad possession of the music is a living representation of the generation of fans who honed and internalized it before him. Yet, as the observer, he is also a diligent digger-outer of knowledge with a historical researcher's penchant for detail and documentation. The industrial-strength academic training he received in his doctoral work—in concert with his native curiosity and smarts—is always evident in thoughtfully crafted and compellingly articulate books. If Stetson made a mortarboard, it would be the "Bill C. Malone" model.

Despite *Country Music USA* having started life as a doctoral

dissertation, its tone and equitable inclusive narrative allowed even the most casual reader to fully grasp the rather miraculous emergence of a national music from the outcroppings of regional and local traditions. For scholars and researchers, it was an unimpeachably thorough and groundbreaking work. Malone's book effortlessly tapped into the bulletproof discipline of a university tome with the lively effervescence of an enthusiastic fan. So why, in the subsequent years with a dependable outpouring of new books, biographies, and country music cable networks, has the importance and relevance of this book remained powerful and undimmed? *Country Music USA*, an evergreen, has been revised but never out of print since its first publication. It is not merely that Malone is the only country music author to have seen Uncle Dave Macon perform in a *Grand Old Opry* tent show in 1949, but it certainly doesn't hurt. Malone is an in-the-bone adherent of the "three chords and the truth" school of country music, a kind of straight-ahead simplicity that has found a fresh revival among the new generation of alt. country/Americana fans. Malone might say that today's mainstream music would sound better if the people from the end of his book knew more about the music of the people from the beginning.

To add depth to the sweep of such an ambitious overview, Malone continues to create a definitive library of books, essays, and liner notes on a satisfyingly wide spectrum of topics and subjects designed to offer a wider and more vibrant platform from which to understand country music in its myriad forms. Away from his writer's desk, he has even taken a star turn on *A Prairie Home Companion* in 2013 and is the featured historian in Ken Burns's forthcoming docuseries on country music, which is based on the narrative within these covers.

Together with his wife, the author, historian, singer, and mandolinist Bobbie, Bill is a ubiquitous presence in Madison, Wisconsin, giving audiences an invaluable visceral connectivity to the old-time country songs and sound he grew up with. Since his arrival in the city in 1997, Malone has hosted *Back to the Country*, a weekly three-hour thematic program on community radio station WORT, an expansive and personal guided tour of country music delivered in his evocative and mellifluous Texas drawl. It might seem that as Bill C. Malone was moved, inspired, and shaped by the great country music coming over his family's old Philco radio, *Back to the Country* is his way of offering a parallel experience to his own eager and fiercely loyal broadcast audience.

And finally, what also makes *Country Music USA* a truly great book *to me* is the role it played in my own life. In the early 1970s, I received a copy when I was just beginning to discover and play old-time music. Malone's book became a vivid cultural passport for a child of Holocaust refugees, who turned to traditional music as a way of accelerating and underscoring a desire to be part of the deep cultural continuity of my family's new adopted American home. When it came time for me to write my book, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to New*—also a first serious history of a musical genre composed by a community-based “participant/observer”—I used Malone's work as a road map, because I, too, hoped to produce something representative and timeless. Only when I arrived in Madison in 2009 to further my work in Yiddish culture did I first meet and get to know Bill and Bobbie Malone, and it is where we have become friends and brought to full circle my connection to the man whose work inspired my own.

Happy birthday, *Country Music USA*! Here's to yet another first: its first fifty years.