



TOP 20 MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY SONGS OF ALL TIME...TODAY:

Whether based on fact or opinion, lists will always provoke debate. That's the fine thing about them. How could he have left *that* out? How could he choose *that* above *that*? That's as maybe; you could be perfectly correct in any instance. When asked to choose my top 20 best / most influential Americana tracks, I could only illicit a loud sigh. There are *thousands* of songs with noted historical importance, just as many afforded classic status for any other given reason, and yet more that are certainly neither, but I want in there anyway because I love them. Ask me tomorrow, and it could well be a different twenty. For today, in absolutely no order of choice, it looks like this:

THE CARTER FAMILY – No Depression

The first dynasty of country could have never known the impact their beautiful composition would have when they wrote it. It went on to be the title of the first Uncle Tupelo album (on which they covered it), a subsequent genre-specific magazine that's become the Americana handbook, and an early, loose term for the whole scene.

FLATT and SCRUGGS – Foggy Mountain Breakdown

The most famous bluegrass instrumental of them all, a tune you'll be intimate with without even realizing, and still the pinnacle of achievement for any banjo player to aspire to.

BILL MONROE – Blue Moon of Kentucky

One of the most covered and revered songs of all time, it is often overlooked that the most influential bluegrass musician of all time wrote it. Without Bill Monroe, it is difficult to surmise where country might be today.

JOHNNY CASH – A Boy Named Sue

A ridiculous choice? Not at all. Firstly, it was a huge hit single. Hit singles sell albums, and I can think of few who deserve to sell records more than Johnny Cash, because he *is* country. I love how this 'novelty record' is viewed as such, considering the most violent imaginable lyrics (outside of Norwegian Black Metal, mebbe), depicting a mighty tear-up between a father and son. It will have to do with the gleeful 'captive' audience laughter present on the live recording – that of a room full of dangerous criminals. It just doesn't get much darker than that.

THE PALACE BROTHERS – There Is No-One What Will Take Care of You

The arrival of a new breed. Tatty and defiantly lo-fi, country had never sounded like this

before, except when played by children. As ramshackle as it is, it is deeply moving and was the first evidence that this Oldham geezer was worth keeping an eye on.

LAMBCHOP – Soaky In The Pooper

Or, when it all went bonkers. The ‘Chop arrived as a Nashville ten-piece, in which each member must play an instrument other than their favoured. Their debut album bears a sleeve shot drawing a dog with his knackers hanging out, and boast titles you want to swim in. How could you resist *Because You Are The Very Air He Breathes*, and this – the oddest song ever written about death? Unique.

WHISKEYTOWN – Losering

This song, for me, marked both a step on in the country-rock scene and the emergence of a brilliant new songwriting talent in Ryan Adams. He may be a cock, but he is also a genius, and this song alone would have been enough for me to buy *Heartbreaker* blind.

NEKO CASE and Her BOYFRIENDS – Porchlight

Oh, mama. It was quite probably this song that re-ignited long-dormant country passion in John Peel. Since roaring about this, he has barely stopped bleating about Laura Cantrell and all things twangy. Good lad. In a voice that oozes more sex than is reasonable in one human being, Neko has delivered what is already considered a milestone.

GILLIAN WELCH – I Dream A Highway

Talking of milestones... This woman’s talent just bewilders me, and that goes for her oft overlooked partner David Rawlings, without whom etc. Two voices, two acoustic guitars, nigh-on 15 minutes of groundbreaking, hypnotic roots wonder and the most important country partnership there is right now. Immense.

THE LONG RYDERS – Looking For Lewis and Clark

The perfect marriage of country and punk and *the* Americana anthem. Looking like The Byrds stranded too long in an Amish community, Sid Griffin’s mighty combo delivers a pioneer tale with a Stooges riff and Dylan sneer, and even the fiercest of cowpunk outfits has yet to match its intensity.

JOHN HARTFORD – Gentle On My Mind

A major banjo virtuoso, riverboat captain and country visionary, the late John Hartford is a man I feel may never receive his dues as a true prime mover in the field. Despite a passionate reissue campaign from BMG in recent years, his remarkable legacy remains largely unexplored by even the most vociferous of country fans. But, as a man who penned songs about washing machines, pre-birth experience, left-handed women, a lifetime lived in one day and *this* standard, he will surely have his time.

BEACHWOOD SPARKS – By Your Side

Cross-pollination gone berserk, and the world is better for it. L.A. dreamers Beachwood Sparks cover icy lounge bore Sade, in a manner reminiscent of Buffalo Springfield and The Byrds. A band potentially capable of kicking Granddaddy and Sparklehorse into touch, they are the kingpins of a slowly-emerging new wave of devotees of those heady, psychedelic

country-rock days. In this respect, look out also for Canyon.

GRAM PARSONS - \$1,000 Wedding

Much has been discussed and written about the pivotal role that this man has played in the history of Americana. Australian country-rocker Jason Walker spent eight years writing a book about him. Sid Griffin wrote another and is a world authority on him. That Gram Parsons inspires such dedication and dictates such historical study says, emphatically, that things would be very different without him. This, like so many of his songs, is about as perfect as it gets. Everything is in place here.

THE NITTY GRITTY DIRT BAND Grand Ole Opry Song

Despite the dollar-driven machinations of mainstream Nashville's Music Row conveyor belt being all-abhorrent to yer average Americana purist, the City of Country still has enough creative outlets and polite encouragement for those the Slaves of Shania consider maverick. Kurt Wagner would happily tell you why. It's about the shared history, and songs like this. There has been no more joyous account of the experience at country's spiritual heart than The Nitty's rousing stomper.

HANK WILLIAMS – Lost Highway

This wouldn't be a valid list without the inclusion of Hank, and I could have chosen just about any song by the man. Lost Highway gets the vote for being the most covered country song I've seen live and for naming a record label, movie, TV documentary series and a Scottish Americana promoting team.

KRIS KRISTOFFERSON – Help Me Make It Through The Night

Not just one of the best country songs, but just one of the best *songs*, full stop. An emotionally pulverizing lyric of desperation and longing atop a swooping, yearning melody, and we have the textbook country heartbreaker from the prettiest outlaw of them all. And who could ever forget this as an erotically charged Whistle Test duet with Rita Coolidge? Shivers every time.

EMRY ARTHUR – Man of Constant Sorrow

The musical centrepiece of *Oh Brother* is undoubtedly George Clooney's rip-roarin' *Man of Constant Sorrow*, voiced by the great Dan Tyminski of Alison Krauss' Union Station. If ever this 'melancholic euphoria' was encapsulated in a song, then it lies in the juxtaposition of sad lyrical sentiment and yee-haw melody of this one. As a country standard, there have been many versions. Arthur's 1929 cut is the first known recorded version, and so the benchmark.

DOLLY PARTON – I Will Always Love You

Great shame that it is, but it took Whitney's demented histrionics to inform a great many millions that the naff little Barbie with the massive knockers actually *writes* songs! It's a certainty they'd always thought she didn't look clever enough. But write songs is what Dolly has always done - superbly so - and you're *always* best off with her own versions.

BLAZE FOLEY – If I Could Only Fly

Foley is a man whose legacy is but a couple of iffy, pieced together posthumous efforts and one live album that was actually (apparently) recorded by accident. He was murdered before he could see its release. A cry from the bottom of the glass, Foley's finest moment gave flight to Merle Haggard's biggest album in years, but the stark original will never be bettered, even by a living legend.

THE BOGGS – Brighter Days

Despite being by far and away the worst live band I saw last year, Brooklyn's The Boggs dropped a smart bomb on Americana with their astonishing debut album. Taking country, folk and delta blues into entirely new areas of attitude and approach, their sound is typified by this chaotic but exhilarating bluegrass / punk interface.

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