

*Proud to be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California.* By Peter La Chapelle. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007. 222 pp. \$60 cloth, \$24.95 paper)

Singer/songwriters Steve Goodman and David Allen Coe once collaborated to pen what they described as the “perfect” country song. “You Never Even Call Me by My Name” was peppered by Coe’s impersonations of famous country singers (e.g., Merle Haggard and Charlie Pride) and concluded with a rambling verse featuring lost love, strong drink, rain, prison, trains, trucks, and Momma. “Well I was drunk the day my Momma got out of prison/ and I went to pick her up in the rain,” Coe sang, with his tongue firmly planted in cheek. “But before I could get to the station in my pickup truck/My Momma, she got run over by a damned old train.”

While Peter La Chapelle would applaud Coe’s Haggard imitation, he would definitely add three more items to the list of ingredients for the perfect country song: politics, class struggle, and race. “I have written this book not just as a history of Okie identity within country music,” writes La Chapelle in the introduction, “but also as a study of urban identity politics, residential segregation, and ultimately, race” (p. xii).

Using Woody Guthrie and Merle Haggard (who wrote and sang the Vietnam-era hit “I’m Proud to be an Okie from Muskegee”) as bookends and pivots, La Chapelle explores Southern California’s country music scene to try and understand the three-decade shift of American workingmen’s allegiances from Franklin Roosevelt’s collectivism to Ronald Reagan’s market capitalism. In so doing, he opens up an important and under-explored topic, based on arduous research in secondary literature, memoirs, interviews, and recording industry archives. He traces this history from Guthrie’s leftist ballads, to Spade Cooley’s western swing, to Haggard’s “Bakersfield Sound,” to the country rock stylings of the Byrds and Flying Burrito Brothers. One of the most important

contributions of this book is demographic. While tracing Okie migration and settlement of the American West, La Chapelle shows marked shifts in the domiciles of country music fans by mapping the locations of working-class neighborhoods and honky-tonk bars and dance halls.

Through the lens of cultural studies, La Chapelle bolsters a conclusion reached by more traditional historians: "The producer-based and citizenship-oriented New Deal liberalism that had captured the attention of millions of working-class voters in the 1930s and 1940s ultimately gave way to a more conservative and less egalitarian property-based political culture in the post-World War II era" (p. 3).

La Chapelle finds this conclusion disheartening. Like many cultural studies proponents, he treats schools of thought as alliances, art as politics, and he yearns for a new day when "California's refugee-outcast tradition might [still] be a powerful tool for highlighting and even combating poverty and political marginalization" (p. 222). Although La Chapelle is uneasy about the right-wing politics represented by Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee," he understands Haggard's ideological contradictions and states on p. 217 that Haggard has probably never even voted.

This is an important book, and reviewers will no doubt approach it in a variety of ways. This reviewer was left wanting less talk of power and race and a more diverse ethnomusicological narrative. This well-researched and well-written book needs a more evocative description of the strains of country fiddles and pedal steel guitars, more mournful tales of lost love, strong drink, and Momma.

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