

CHAPTER 12

Lavender Country

'It don't matter here who you love or what you wear, 'cause we don't care who's got what chromosomes ...'

'Lavender Country' by Patrick Haggerty

With talk of a major US music event, the Americana Festival, adding a gay strand to its programme, a high-profile radio and television presenter coming out and LGBT artists finally getting the recognition they deserve, 2017 looks likely to be the year that country music finally wakes up to the needs of its LGBT audience and performers. Sometimes it can take a while to be fully appreciated. Just ask Patrick Haggerty, whose album, *Lavender Country*, was added to the Country Music Hall of Fame collection in 2000, more than a quarter of a century after it was first issued, but who is only now receiving the respect and attention due to him as a pioneer of the country music scene.

Country (Country-Western, Country & Western; for simplicity we'll stick to simply 'country') music has long ploughed its own musical furrow, one where steers, tears and beers – but seldom queers – provide the fuel for singers and songwriters. Originating in the 1920s, although country music is seen as a peculiarly American art form, its roots can be traced through English folk music, Negro spirituals, vaudeville, the blues, Appalachian music (adapted from the music brought over by British immigrants, including traditional Irish and Scottish fiddle music), Hawaiian guitar and even Alpine yodelling. Developing in the Southern states, initially under the names old-time and hillbilly



Lavender Country

An Album of Gay Music

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Press advert for *Lavender Country*

(especially when the predominant instrument was the fiddle), the earliest recordings were made not in country's spiritual home Nashville but more than 200 miles south in Atlanta (by Fiddlin' John Carson for the Okeh label) in 1923. Ralph Peer, who made those historic first recordings using rudimentary mobile equipment (basically an enormous horn that Carson performed live in front of), would go from Okeh to the Victor Talking Machine Company where, in 1927, he would cut the first discs (out of a makeshift studio in Bristol, Tennessee) from pioneering country artists the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. If the blues was predominantly black, then country was aimed squarely at white, working-class America.

Peer's recordings helped to popularise country, and the fame of the artists involved quickly spread nationwide, thanks primarily to the influence of radio and the nationally available Grand Ole Opry programme which began in 1925. It would not be long before Hollywood would get in on the act, promoting the image of the singing cowboy in his Stetson hat, elaborately embroidered Western shirt and blue jeans that is still the recognised uniform of the country musician today.

For five decades, country music remained the bastion of hard drinking, hard-working, womanising 'real men' and their hard-done-by women; if a country song referenced anyone other than a fests first questions later macho hunk or a broken-hearted woman standing by her brutish husband, it would usually be in derogatory terms, like in Vernon Dalhart's 1939 release 'Lavender Cowboy' (written by Harold Hersey in 1923), which was banned the following year from being played on the radio because of its suggestive lyrics, or Billy Briggs' infamous 1951 recording 'The Sissy Song': 'When I get sissy enough ... I'll go out behind the old red barn and let a grey mule kick my brains out'. Then, in 1973, along came *Lavender Country*.

Now in his early 70s and still playing, Patrick Haggerty seems an unlikely musical trendsetter, yet *Lavender Country* truly was a groundbreaking release: the very first out-gay country album. k.d. lang may have hogged headlines when she came out as lesbian in 1992, at the same time as she released her fifth (and still most successful) album *Ingénue*, but *Lavender Country* had started to plough that particular furrow a full

20 years earlier, and today's LGBT artists – including Canadian singer Drake Jensen, Ty Herndon, Billy Gilman, Steve Grand, Shane McAnally and Chely Wright – are proving that a genre that was once seen as the last bastion of 'straight' western music is slowly but surely opening up to everyone.

According to the press release that accompanied its 2014 reissue, *Lavender Country*

stands as nothing less than an artefact of courage, a sonic political protest document of enormous power, clarity, and grace. At once a scathing indictment of the injustices perpetrated on the homosexual community, a proud proclamation of gay identity, and a love letter of bracing intimacy and eroticism, the album radically appropriates the signifiers of the conservative country genre, queering its heteronormative vocabulary into a deeply personal language.

Brought up on a dairy farm within a loving and supportive family, Haggerty wrote songs for *Lavender Country* that are filled with both humour and deep emotion. With titles such as 'Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears' and 'Back In the Closet Again', the record is very much a reflection of his own experiences, from his upbringing in rural Washington, through his dismissal from the Peace Corps because of his sexuality, his incarceration (at the hands of the family physician) in a mental hospital (an experience he shares with Lou Reed and Tom Robinson) and his struggle to be heard as a young gay man when he came out, empowered by the Stonewall Riots. 'Most of us were angry,' he says of those days. 'I think anger spurred us all on. I'd been kicked out of the Peace Corps and ended up in a mental institution. I spent eight years jobless; no one would hire me because my mouth was so big. All of us knew that we were potentially sacrificing our lives.'¹ Haggerty attests that he had 'more than one personal friend murdered' for being gay.

Now living just outside Seattle with his husband J.B. (the couple had been together for years before J.B. even heard of *Lavender Country*) Haggerty and his friends – keyboard player Michael Carr, Eve Morris (violin, acoustic guitar and vocals) and guitar player Robert Hammerstrom – formed a four-piece band, which he dubbed Lavender

Country. With financial support from Seattle's Gay Community Services – who provided counselling, a community centre, health information and more to the local LGBT community – Lavender Country released their sole eponymous album in 1973. Featuring eleven songs, nine written by Haggerty and one apiece from Moore and Hammerstrom, only 1,000 copies of the album were pressed through the pages of gay-friendly publications in the Seattle area. The original sleeve notes confirm the band's desire to 'confront the oppression gay people experience daily and affirm the joys of liberation' when local DJ Shan Otrey (who later directed the documentary *My Apple Pie: The Heart of the Lesbian Mothers' Custody Movement*) played 'Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears' on air her station, KRAB, received obscenity fine from the Federal Communications Commission and lost her licence to broadcast.

The group continued to perform together for the next five years although they played prestigious dates such as San Francisco Gay Pride and the musicians were making a living. Eventually the band split apart, and Haggerty took a job in the social work field with Seattle Council's Human Rights department. In the late 1980s, he was one of the founders the Seattle chapter of AIDS-advocacy organisation AIDUP, and he ran for office in state senate and city council elections, but lost. He had supported a multi-racial, pro-feminist and pro-gay platform since his formation in New York in 1979.

The album would have been no more than a footnote if it had not been for an article written by Chris Dickinson which was published in the *Journal of Country Music* in 2000. Titled 'Country Undetectable: Gay Artists in Country Music', that piece announced to the world the existence of a new organisation, the Lesbian and Gay Country Music Association (LGCMA), had been formed with the express intention of challenging the boundaries of country music, and belatedly introduced *Lavender Country* to the world. Looking back now, it seems ridiculous that LGBT country artists were all but invisible in country music; however, only a few years earlier, country artist Mike Deasy, a guitarist who had played on sessions for the Monkees, the Beach Boys, Simon and Garfunkel, Tiny Tim, Fitzgerald and countless others, recorded the hateful 'God Hates Queer

which featured the lines 'you're going straight to hell and there you'll stay' and 'I don't need no AIDS from no gay plague'; homophobia was still rampant in Nashville, and few people were surprised when, at a few months after she began to champion country's LGBT artists, Chris Dickinson lost her job.

Still, her article reawakened interest: *Lavender Country* was reissued on this time on compact disc and, in June 2000 at Seattle's Gay Pride Day, Haggerty launched a follow-up EP, *Lavender Country Revisited*, featuring new recordings of three tracks from the album plus two new songs.

'*Lavender Country* might have been forgotten if it weren't for the work of Chrissie Dickinson,' said Doug Stevens, founder and president of the LGCMA and leader of the OutBand. 'Her article shocked the Nashville scene with its celebration of openly gay country musicians. Chrissie wrote about gay country singers with admiration and respect. She celebrated our contribution to the tradition of country music.'² Born and raised in Mississippi, in a house with no indoor plumbing but with a colour television,³ Stevens, a classically-trained counter-tenor, grew up surrounded by country music (his parents and grandparents were all musicians) and pursued a successful career in classical music. In 1990 he received the devastating news that he was HIV-positive: his then-partner abandoned him and he spiralled into what he described as

an eight-month depression. I remembered seeing an interview with Tammy Wynette on TV when I was a kid. She had said that when she was depressed, she wrote a song about what she was feeling and it made her feel a lot better. So, I decided that I would write a song about a man whose lover left him because he was HIV-positive. I thought that it would take a long time to write. I had never tried to write a song before. But I put pen to paper and within 15 minutes I had a nice song. It made me feel much better, so I wrote another one, then another one, and another one. The songs that came out of me were country songs. I saw that gay people didn't have country music about our lives, even though we bought a lot of music. So, I decided to form a country band to perform the music that I was writing about my life and experiences as a gay country man, living in the big city.⁴

Stevens formed the OutBand in 1992 to perform his original, gender-specific songs for primarily gay audiences. 'Just as country music is the most popular music in the US it is also the most popular music among gays and lesbians,' he said.⁵ The OutBand played all over the US, Mexico and Northern Europe; at one point Stevens was fronting two different versions of the band, one in San Francisco and the other based in New York City, and for a couple of years Patrick Haggerty was a member. The two men also toured and recorded together in the band Pearl River. 'The Chris Dickinson article put me in touch with Doug,' Haggerty reveals, 'and I worked with him for a few years. That was good for me because he was a fabulous teacher and he was in touch with some fabulous musicians who believed in me. They took me under their wing – was really raw and really green and they showed me a lot of good shit.' Stevens retired from recording in 2007, transitioned, and is now – as Teresa McLaughlin – happily married and working as a freelance writer.

The renewed interest in *Lavender Country* lasted a couple of years. 'Around 2004 it went dead again,' Haggerty says. 'I was retired, my husband was retired and I was having a nice life, but I was still singing. Patrick was playing over 100 gigs a year 'singing old songs to old people' in nursing homes and Alzheimer's units' with his musician friend Bobb Taylor. 'I love the old songs, I know hundreds, and that's what those people want to hear – it's joyful'. Then:

I'd been doing that for like a decade or more, then someone put "Cocksucking Tears" on YouTube. I didn't know anything about it. Someone else heard it and said: "what is this?", went to eBay, found and old, used *Lavender Country* album for sale and purchased it. He was a music aficionado, not gay, and he realised what *Lavender Country* was: he realised its historical significance. He took it to a couple of guys in North Carolina, straight men who had a label ... and I still have no idea that anybody is talking about *Lavender Country*. I don't know anything about what's been happening. But they're all talking to each other. The first time I knew anything was when the label called up offering me a contract. I didn't believe them, I thought they were encyclopaedia salesmen; I thought it was a bunch of bullshit! The furthest thing from my mind would be having some voice on the

phone offering me a record contract. I did not believe a word that was coming out of his mouth!

'The independent Paradise of Bachelors label, which specialises in documenting, curating, and releasing under-recognised musics of the American vernacular,' reissued *Lavender Country* in 2014. More than four decades after they first walked into a recording studio together, Haggerty and the rest of the band were about to get the recognition they, and their pioneering record, deserved.

'These people were not gay,' Haggerty adds:

They were straight white men who worked in the music industry. There's not a whole raft of bigots running in to that career; musicians make really poor bigots! Musicians, promoters, people who write about music a lot of them are straight white men and they're the ones who have the power – and the straight white men who occupy positions in the music industry in 2016 are completely different to who they were in 1973 and all of them are down with gay rights and equal rights. The time is right, and it's right because all of these straight white men in the music industry are on board, and they have power and they're going: "I want to stand up. I want to be part of this. I want the world to know what side of the fence I'm on." It's a really nice thing, and these straight white men are making it possible for everybody's ear to open up. *Lavender Country* jumped out of the gay ghetto because these straight men in North Carolina with their brave new label allowed it in to the mainstream. What they're doing is giving a whole bunch of straight people permission to go and listen. We've been doing a lot of shows to general, not gay-specific, audiences, and when people have permission they go nuts!

'The careers of Patrick Haggerty and Doug Stevens might seem a little niche, but today more and more country artists – and bigger and bigger names – are finding the courage to come out. If you had anticipated a push in the wake of k.d. lang's very public self-outing, you would have been sorely disappointed; however, it seems that now – in the second decade of the twenty-first century – the audience is more than ready