

WHEN COUNTRY WAS COUNTRY

A note from Eddie Dean

Country music, at least the kind you hear on the radio, has been a joke for so long now that's easy to forget that it was considered a joke even when it was a vital American art form. The Southern rural culture that gave birth to country music and later begat Elvis was for generations a national joke, ridiculed as a backwater cesspool of poverty and ignorance left behind by a progressive, mainstream America. In the late '40s and early '50s, when hillbilly stars as Roy Acuff and Hank Williams sold millions of records, most people looked down on country as the music of poor white trash.

By the time Leon Kagarise came of age in the late '50s, the rock 'n' roll revolution engendered a suburban teen culture that likewise rejected the country music that Elvis and so many of rock's pioneers were raised on. Doubly despised by his parents' generation and the youth culture of his peers, the country music Leon loved became marginalized and found refuge in the remote outdoor parks where he chronicled its final years as a grassroots, homegrown music.

For more than a decade, Leon Kagarise made live recordings and took hundreds of photos at country-music parks along the Mason-Dixon Line in rural Maryland and Pennsylvania. He later said he was simply trying to "preserve the moments" that gave him an inutterable joy. He was not an artist or even a self-conscious documentarian. He was a country-music fan. What he captured with his secondhand Zeiss Ikon camera was a magical time when stars mixed with the faithful with an ease that showed they hadn't gotten above their raising.

The images get their power from a simple clarity and a sense of gratitude. The subjects are given a respect and dignity long denied them by society at large, earning these photographs a rightful place aside Walker Evans' portraits of Depression-era migrant farmers in *Let Us Know Praise Famous Men*.

The world Kagarise documented is long since vanished, but its legacy lives on in bluegrass festivals and other scattered places in the hinterlands where the old-time sounds endure. One of the fans who attended shows at the country-music parks in the early '60s was the late Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. When asked about his music heroes, Garcia didn't hesitate with a response. He said whenever he needed inspiration, he would get as close as he could to the stage and watch Scotty Stoneman take a fiddle solo.

The same can be said of *Pure Country*. A treasure trove of country-music apocrypha and a source of inspiration that is there for the taking. It's an open invitation to come to the edge of the stage, ears and eyes open, where Leon Kagarise spent so many Sunday afternoons at the feet of the masters.

Hope you enjoy it.

Eddie Dean