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Sincerely
Bette Davis



Don't forget
Don't forget



*June Carter with the Tennessee Three
NEW RIVER RANCH,
Rising Sun, Maryland
1962*

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✧FOREWORD✧

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BY ROBERT GORDON AND TARA McADAMS

The camera blinks, and time seems to stand still. But time never slows, never halts, always changes. It's the movement of light caught in the camera's mechanics that becomes fixed. The moment sets, becomes tangible, and is offered to the future.

1958 to 1968 was a period of change, when U.S. society was reconfiguring itself radically. On the east coast, between Washington, D.C. and New York City, in the midst of the most radical changes, there were two country music hideaways where "progress" seemed not to encroach. One was a little holler outside of Baltimore called the New River Ranch, and the other was a farm nestled in the verdant Amish country east of Philadelphia, Sunset Park. While superhighways were connecting towns to cities and cities to a sprawling metroplex, a wall of trees and tradition protected these sanctuaries where folks gathered to hear country music played like it always had been played. And unlike it was being heard on the radio.

It was as if these two venues had flowed north from Appalachia. Within the dense urban populations, there were those who treasured country music's simplicities, either hearkening to their own past or romanticizing what the music evoked as an alternative to the increasingly restive world around them. Though open to the public, both New River Ranch and Sunset Park were like secret enclaves, the same crowd returning over and over. Patrons would drive through the trees, pay a dollar for the carload and check their present tense at the entrance. Out came the picnic suppers, the kids ran loose, and anyone could be up close and personal with some of the biggest names in country music.

But for the odd recording and the apocryphal stories, this once-thriving scene would have been lost. Fortunately, one of the parishioners of these temples to timelessness was an audio engineer from Baltimore named Leon Kagarise. A compulsive collector

and technologically adroit, he was a fan who wanted to retain the moment. To touch it again. Kagarise made crisp audio recordings, and he preserved the scene with several hundred color slides.

Country music was undergoing a seismic change when Leon took his first photograph in '58. Several years earlier, Sun Records in Memphis had unleashed a new take on country music, hopping it up with a dose of blues and rhythm. Now, we see this new style as rock and roll, but back then the new sound was part of the country world. The Grand Ole Opry invited Elvis to perform in 1954. And did not invite him back.

The trend that came to dominate country music was a response to the quake from Memphis. As one force pushed, the other pulled. Nashville producer Owen Bradley replaced fiddles and steel guitars with string and vocal sections, making country music smoother and less identifiable as a genre. Producer Chet Atkins followed suit, their stylistic changes soon dominating Nashville's output. The result was that Ernest Tubb still drawled like the Texan he was, but the cactus and tumbleweed in his accompaniment were replaced by smooth cotton sheets chilled in air conditioning. Country singers who adapted to the lush orchestrations saw an increase in sales and popularity: Jim Reeves, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, and Conway Twitty were no longer just singers, they became *recording artists*. Producers assumed a new power, creating studio sounds that had little or no relation to an artist's stage show. If the record could not be reproduced on stage, so be it; in fact, many artists had no interest in ever reproducing the slick, controlled contrivances—the “recording art”—ever again. The studio recordings generated record sales, but when the songs became part of the stage repertoire, they were adapted to fit the more traditional instrumental lineup of the performer's traveling bands.

What Leon Kagarise saw and heard at the New River Ranch and at Sunset Park bypassed these fault lines in the country music industry. Exiting the superhighway's ramp, stars and fans preserved a bucolic moment of community that was increasingly hard to find beyond the woods that surrounded

the park. As seen in Leon's photographs, the performers stepped to the stage from among the audience of their peers. At New River Ranch, there was no backstage to speak of—a storage area for the bass fiddle was about it. With no restricted or exclusive artist's area, most performers awaited their stage call walking among the crowds, accepting an invitation to sit and eat, share a smoke, maybe pick a little during an intermission. Many in the audience, and not just the kids, are seen wearing outfits like their heroes and it can be hard to tell who's about to take the stage. A part of the audience that also happens to perform, the stars are burping up barbecue chicken, swatting at the bugs, sweating in the heat like civilians. The divide between the performer and the audience existed only when music was being made and one faced the other.

A great deal of the photographs' charm is the simplicity of what's captured. Nashville had been polishing its country music gems, the high gloss of the lush production values making country music palatable to a wider demographic. But there is no gloss here, just the unvarnished wood of picnic tables and wide planks for seating. Icons like Johnny Cash and the Louvin Brothers are presented plainly, almost baldly, as the line between the famed and familiar recedes.

You can almost touch the intimacy and authenticity in the pictures. There's no dramatic lighting, no sense of the hermetic studio. Look how many artists have something in their hands—a cigarette, a pen, a disposable drinking cup. Sometimes their hair's a mess, sometimes a shoulder strap has strayed. Some are posed, but it's the way you pose your daughter before the prom, or your uncle at the bar mitzvah; there's none of that contrived “genuineness” of professional shoots. June Carter—fantastic from a rear angle, a frothy dress, her shoulders squared just so to deliver the cornpone humor. The way Skeeter Davis clutches a stuffed doll, you can tell she's not just sending a message of thanks to the fan she's speaking with, she's feeling the love from them both.

Up front was the place to be at these shows. It's a wonder Leon could get the camera high enough to take a picture when Ernest Tubb played; it's the Matterhorn of ten gallon headgear. And when Johnny Cash is on stage, and the

Carters too—people got early to the stage's edge and hung on like Sherpas until it was time to go. (In one, June Carter has her foot on a chair to help prop up her guitar; the men must have fought to be in front for that. What June lacked in pipes, she made up for in personality; she knew how to sell a song.)

Though a star may be at the center of Leon's photographs, the eye is often drawn to the periphery. In one shot, Hattie Stoneman is seated on a bed, playing the guitar, while a pixiesh child leans nearby, her white knee socks in perfect contrast to Ms. Stoneman's very artificial wig. Wires run like snakes down the wall behind them, and the mood of the moment and the decade is captured perfectly.

Not only Leon's photographs but also his recordings—he was an audio engineer before he was a photographer—transport us to this lost time. With a single mic, he puts us center stage, on the stage, among country stars who play country music in the country for country people. It's a sound, a world, that has largely eluded posterity. Record labels were not making live recordings of country music at the time—the technology in the studio was too enormous to move, and portable recording had to be dismissed: If anyone could do it, then what was the purpose of a recording company?

In the middle of the 1960s, the Beatles came to America. By the end of the decade, they couldn't perform live anymore because their fans were too rabid. Elvis had returned to performing live, playing in sports arenas on sound systems built for the announcer's play-by-play. And country music, for the most part, got swept up in the new Nashville sound, the cosmopolitan swank that was the natural conclusion of what Owen Bradley had begun. All of these musical “moments” have been documented and analyzed to death.

Which brings us to an underlying power of Kagarise's photographs. These are a collection of images that shouldn't be here. These are not a performance on Ed Sullivan, a press clipping, a photo op. No one showed up for the express purpose of having his or her picture made. These are the visual equivalent of the stories your grandmother told you—about how she always sat on the stage when Ernest

Tubb played, or the time that Mother Maybelle sewed a button on her shirt before she took to the stage. There's a homeliness and a hominess to these images that belong to the realm of oral history, carried down through family lore. We're drawn in by the deserted stage, not much larger than a storage shed, with rows of roughhewn seating that ask us to sit down. We are compelled—not to ogle or admire, but to participate when we view these pictures.

Leon Kagarise's photographs resuscitate a world that's been washed away by technology, erased and replaced by managers and lawyers, contracts and corporations. If Kagarise's world weren't presented so simply, it would be mythic. Story telling has been gently but inexorably demoted as an art form, marginalized to Public Radio and children's specials. Ephemeral in nature, ephemeral like nature, storytelling has a dynamism born of the equal demands that it places on the listener and the teller. Kagarise's images preserve a very particular and quickly vanishing stage of country music. The photographs are unaffected, unassuming, the surroundings immediate, and by looking at them, we engage. The musicians, the audience, the cars and the trees—they all fill in the narrative. Like Leon Kagarise, we fall in love.

Ernest Tubb
NEW RIVER RANCH
1962



Skeeter Davis with fans
NEW RIVER RANCH
1961