

# "The heart and soul of country music is the experiences of ordinary people"

## An interview with Dale Watson

**Richard Phillips**  
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One of the more interesting music documentaries screened on Australian television this year was *Naked Nashville*, a Channel Four production about American country music. While the program did not provide a definitive history of country music, a rich genre with varied traditions and numerous musical sub-groups, the four-part series did expose the crass commercialism dominating the Nashville music industry today and interviewed a number of musicians and critics who voiced their concerns about the artistic decline of their craft.

Among the musicians interviewed was Dale Watson, a 37-year-old singer/guitarist based in Austin, Texas, who writes and performs songs in the honky-tonk tradition of the 1950s and 60s. Watson, who has recorded several CDs, including *Cheatin' Heart Attack*, *Blessed or Damned* and the newly released *Miles of Music*, is fiercely loyal to the musical traditions of classic country artists such as Lefty Frizzell, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash and others largely rejected by today's commercial country music producers and radio stations. Watson spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* during a recent tour of clubs and hotels on Australia's east coast.

**Richard Phillips:** Can you provide me with some background on your main musical influences?

**Dale Watson:** Country music was always in my family. My dad played acoustic electric guitar. He was born in Kentucky and had southern roots, and so does my mother who was from North Carolina. There was always music being played around the house and so there was a kind of natural gravitation to country music for me.

I lived in North Carolina until I was 12 years old and then we moved to Texas, which has different musical influences. I heard a lot of Western Swing there, which influenced me a lot, and I began playing in beer joints while I was still at high school. I heard people like Lefty [Frizzell], George Jones, Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash on the jukeboxes and learned their songs. The music that other people my age were listening to at that time didn't really appeal to me.

I made a good living playing right off; in fact I was 14 years old when I got my first paying show. At 18, I fronted a band with my brothers called the Classic Country Band. It lasted a while and I was making a reasonable living.

My mother kept saying to me, "When are you going to get a real job, something to fall back on?" But I can't do something properly unless I devote all my time to it. To work a job and then try to make music doesn't work, or at least it doesn't for me. One or the other suffers. Of course I have played many shows where I didn't make much money, but they're the dues you have to pay.

My dad had a job working from 7 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock at night and played music at night. In my opinion if he had devoted himself to music he would have got a lot further, but the family had to eat

and so he had to work. It was hard for him. In fact, I wrote *Blessed or Damned*, which is the title cut of my second album, looking at my father's experiences. He had the ability to go further in music but he did what everyone said you are supposed to do and that is paying the bills. He did many things in his life—he was truck driver, factory foreman, owned his own service station and then a few years before he died went back to truck driving. He kept playing music right through all these difficult times. He died in 1991.

**RP:** When did you become a full-time musician?

**DW:** I worked in a couple of jobs here and there, but at 19 decided to become a full-time professional musician, to dedicate myself 100 percent to music. People told me that it would be a hard road but at the time it seemed easy, was fun, and you think you're going to live forever.

In 1994, when I was 32 and the country music being played on the radio was so bad—it was as bad then as what it is now—I decided to cash it in and learn a trade.

There were no outlets for the music I wanted to do and I couldn't play the Nashville game. It ate a hole in my stomach and most of what was being produced was just bad 1970s pop music. Don't get me wrong though, some 1970s rock music has integrity and grit, but Nashville was producing stuff that was an insult to your mentality—whatever it took to get the dollars. In any case, the country music scene hit a real low in 1994 and so I decided to go to a community college and learn how to repair motorcycles and just play my music on the weekends.

But as soon as I signed up for the community college course, a label in Europe contacted me about bringing out a CD with some songs that I'd recorded. I agreed and sent a copy off to HighTone in the States to see if they wanted to put it out in America. I didn't think anything would happen but it caught on and they wanted me to sign a record deal. This was a turning point. They agreed to let me do it the way I wanted, which is rare with record companies.

**RP:** What brought you to this point?

**DW:** I was very frustrated. The previous record label wanted to dress me up and produce songs they thought would sell. The producers said I couldn't do any drinking songs—they were way out in the early 90s—and they wanted the music to be snappy and commercial. I put out two records, and although I was able to keep the integral part of the music there, they got fed up with me arguing with them all the time.

Of course I don't want just play drinking songs or cheating songs, but music that runs the gamut. The country music I grew up listening to—material from Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard, George Jones—had a lot of social commentary and ran the whole range of emotions. But in the early 1990s country music was all the same, and it all had to have a positive message—as they said in *Naked Nashville*, the TV documentary—Nashville producers want upbeat love songs about happy

people, this is the order of the day.

**RP:** Why is the Nashville sound so bland?

**DW:** For a second I was going to say I don't know, but I do. What I don't understand is why it's allowed. It's bland because it is being produced and made by pop producers who don't like country music. Matt Lang, Shania Twain's producer, for example, is from a heavy metal band and these people don't want what they say is whiny stuff, or what they think are the bad messages of society. But the heart and soul of country music is storytelling, social commentary, first-person type of music and all of them are about the experiences of ordinary people.

One of my favorite songs is Johnny Cash's *Ballad of Ira Hayes*. This deals with the problems of a real person and is not just written to be controversial or to stir up emotions in a superficial way. It's honest, and if the best country music is anything, it's direct and honest.

Garth Brooks has a song called *The Thunder Rolls*, which is about wife abuse, but it is completely contrived. Brooks is a marketing major and every move he makes is calculated to manipulate. Now he has started this thing called the Chris Gaines Project in which he has adopted the alter ego of a rock star. They have even made a prequel to a movie that he hopes to star in as this rock musician. This has nothing to do with country music.

Another problem in Nashville is that the producers own the publishing companies, have their own writers, and so naturally they want to push their songs. So you have all this back scratching going on, and it's all aimed at taking the hide off the consumer. It is sad state of affairs.

**RP:** Can you put a date on when country music made this downturn and why?

**DW:** It was about 20 years, in 1977 or '78 when Kenny Rogers and all this big production stuff came in. They did away with steel guitar and put in more strings and the music became more and more syrupy. In fact the songs sound like they have been written by a couple of guys in a room without any contact with the real world, and it sounds like a product.

Don't get me wrong, not all the music produced by first time artists that go to Nashville is bad. But there is tremendous pressure on them to produce hits, and if a record is a hit there is even more pressure. I've learnt the hard way about this and realised that you have to do what you want. If things go wrong then you only have yourself to blame.

I've just signed with a major label and you feel this kind of pressure. My decision to sign with this company was based on having the right to record my songs, with my band in the studio, with the producer that I wanted, and then just hand them the record. I don't want to know about marketing, it's up to them what they want to do with it. I'd love to make a record with a big red label on the front saying: "Do not buy this record if you don't like country music". I want people to know exactly what they are getting.

My father provided my basic musical roots. He grew up in Kentucky listening to Roy Acuff and the Grand Old Opry. They would get to together every Saturday night, push the table and chairs back, turn the radio on and have fun. His uncle Jim played guitar with Merle Travis, when Merle was a coal miner. My father also listened to the Carter family, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams and George Jones. And when I came to Texas I heard Bob Wills, George Jones, Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash. These are my roots.

But country music has cut itself off from those roots. There are many tonality differences and other variations between the various genres in country music but there is still a connection between them. You can hear the kinship between a Merle Haggard song, like *Old Man from the Mountain*, and Bill Monroe's *Blue Moon of Kentucky*, and it is easy to spot it. There are all sorts of connections, you can hear links between all sorts country songs but when you get to Kenny Rogers there is no connection, it crosses over and becomes part of the pop genre and you get people like Shania Twain and Garth Brooks. A lot of fans think country music is supposed to sound like Garth Brooks or the Eagles, but they don't bother researching the music that influenced them.

In Nashville they talk about Merle Haggard and George Jones. "Yeah, we love them guys, oh yeah," they say, but then they produce something that has no relationship with this music at all. And what comes out at the other end sounds like the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac or even Captain and Tennille. Or at least that's what I hear.

**RP:** What venues are available for your type of music?

**DW:** When I am in the States I only play the rock and roll rooms because the people who go there are the only ones who support my kind of music. I don't play in honky-tonks; in fact, they don't even call them honky-tonks any more. And the so-called country clubs are really bad with mainly line dancing or even disco line dancing full of people wearing cowboy hats and jeans and big belt buckles. There are saddles all over the place and hanging ferns and the music you hear is *YMCA* by the Village People. I'm not exaggerating, its terrible, this is what you see when you walk into places like Boomers, Rodeo or Jitterbugs.

The country music that I and some other people are doing now will have to branch off, just like bluegrass, and not be considered part of the commercial country music scene. Bluegrass split off when Nashville began to develop a commercial sound. Of course it is still played on the Grand Old Opry, but as far as the radio is concerned, the powers that be didn't want it on the radio.

Today most of the stations will not play bluegrass and although people like Alison Krauss helped to bring it back a little bit there are only a handful of stations. Some of these are the college radio stations, and that's where my music mostly gets played.

So the music that I play will have to develop its own name, touring circuit and audience. This has already started and because of the Internet might even have better chance. Through the Internet people can find out about me, and my music, and similar musicians. They can access from Germany, England, Australia, all over. You didn't have that when bluegrass was getting established.

My folks have even got computers and that's saying a lot because it was hard enough to get them to use call waiting. Now they realise the potential that is there. So I think the Internet is going to breathe life into something that might have died.

A few years ago Merle Haggard said that the commercial country music industry wanted non-emotional music. This is true, they want music that is non-intrusive; background music that you don't have to think about, the type of songs that allow people to ramble through their day without thinking. *Jessie Brown*, the song I wrote about the death of a young mother, is a real story; it's about the problems of ordinary people. *Send me back home* by Merle Haggard is about a guy going to the electric chair. The powers that be don't want people to be thinking about that.

**RP:** They don't want people sensitised to what is really going on around them?

**DW:** Yeah, that's right. If Nashville really wants to be the emotional mover that it says it wants to be then it has to deal with real people and real events. It sounds bland because it doesn't really come from the heart. And it will stay that way until the money dries up, and they're forced to think about what they are doing. Shania Twain, the Dixie Chicks and today's big names in country sell lots of records, but there is no originality. It doesn't feed anybody emotionally and worst of all it doesn't feed anyone's soul.



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