



TIME  
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CONTEMPORARY  
COUNTRY

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## The Mid-'80s

1. **Guitars, Cadillacs** Dwight Yoakam
2. **Guitar Town** Steve Earle
3. **Mama He's Crazy** The Judds
4. **Does Fort Worth Ever Cross Your Mind** George Strait
5. **Highwayman** Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson
6. **Nobody Loves Me Like You Do** Anne Murray with Dave Loggins
7. **I Can Tell by the Way You Dance (You're Gonna Love Me Tonight)** Vern Gosdin
8. **Morning Desire** Kenny Rogers
9. **Too Much on My Heart** The Statler Brothers
10. **That's the Way Love Goes** Merle Haggard
11. **Lost in the Fifties Tonight (In the Still of the Night)** Ronnie Milsap
12. **Mind Your Own Business** Hank Williams Jr.
13. **Never Be You** Rosanne Cash
14. **Baby's Got Her Blue Jeans On** Mel McDaniel
15. **Boo** Don Peab
16. **Real Love** Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers
17. **Roll On (Eighteen Wheeler)** Alabama
18. **Modern Day Romance** Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
19. **On the Other Hand** Randy Travis
20. **Mama's Never Seen Those Eyes** The Forester Sisters
21. **Dixie Road** Lee Greenwood
22. **Country Boy** Ricky Skaggs

## SEE PROGRAM NOTES INSIDE

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# CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

THE MID-'80s

COMPACT  
disc  
DIGITAL AUDIO

CCD-01  
OPCD-2654

TIME  
LIFE  
MUSIC

1. Guitars, Cadillac 2. Guitar Town 3. Mama He's Crazy 4. Does Fort Worth Ever Cross  
Your Mind 5. Highwayman 6. Nobody Loves Me Like You Do 7. I Can Tell by the Way  
You Dance (You're Gonna Love Me Tonight) 8. Morning Desire 9. Too Much on My  
Heart 10. That's the Way Love Goes 11. Lost in the Fifties Tonight (In the Still  
of the Night) 12. Mind Your Own Business 13. Never Be You 14. Baby's  
Got Her Blue Jeans On 15. Bop 16. Real Love 17. Roll On (Eighteen  
Wheeler) 18. Modern Day Romance 19. On the Other Hand  
20. Mama's Never Seen Those Eyes 21. Dixie  
Road 22. Country Boy

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# CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

THE MID-'80s

Country-pop crossovers became common in the early 1980s primarily because of the Urban Cowboy phenomenon. But by the middle of the decade, country music found itself sounding more like pop for no apparent reason. A purist backlash set in, spurred by the "new traditionalists"—notably Randy Travis, Dwight Yoakam and Steve Earle.

Travis was from North Carolina and had several scrapes with the law before he was put in the custody of local nightclub owner Lib Hatcher. They went to Nashville in 1981, and she opened a club where Travis sang. Her hustling soon won him a record contract, though his hard, Southeastern mountain sound couldn't have been more at odds with prevailing trends.

**On the Other Hand** was written by Paul Overstreet and Don Schlitz, one of the hottest song-writing teams in Nashville, after they got stuck in the middle of another song that included the phrase "on the one hand." Reading it back, the exasperated Schlitz interrupted himself and said, "On

the other hand . . .," to which Overstreet quickly added, "There's a golden band." Just like that, they were off and writing a new song, which took a mere hour to complete. Released as the first single from Travis' debut album, it stopped at No. 67 on the charts, and Warner Bros. replaced it with 1982, which went top 10. A label executive then insisted they promote *On the Other Hand* again, and this time it soared straight to No. 1.

Dwight Yoakam, a former drama student from Ohio State, had tried unsuccessfully to have a hit in Nashville in the mid-'70s. He moved to Los Angeles and worked the bar circuit in the San Fernando Valley, creating a sound that combined the acoustic bluegrass of his native Kentucky with the Bakersfield honky-tonk drive of Buck Owens. Before long, he was playing the roots-rock clubs in L.A. With **Guitars, Cadillacs**, the story of a displaced country boy who overcomes Hollywood hardships while staying true to himself, Yoakam put his experience into a traditional

country context.

Steve Earle represented a different kind of tradition: His role models were the mid-'70s Texas "outlaw" singer-songwriters like Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, who bucked the Nashville establishment by attaching country themes to pop arrangements and production techniques. Earle had first come to Nashville as a teenager in 1974 to play bass with Guy Clark, one of the leaders of that movement. For more than a decade, Earle kicked around Nashville, Texas and Mexico, inspired by road-hardened folk heroes and beatnik writers such as Jack Kerouac. In the mid-'80s, after extricating himself from a bad publishing deal, Earle was ready to make his own career move with a debut album that drew heavily from the on-the-road ethos. One of the first songs he wrote was **Guitar Town**, his salute to the musician's life. Unlike Travis and Yoakam, though, the ever-rebellious Earle soon deserted country music for more rock-oriented material.

Traditional country sounds were the vehicle for such relative newcomers as George Strait, the Judds and Ricky Skaggs. Strait surfaced in 1981 with a swing-oriented, Texas honky-tonk groove unlike anything else on the charts. In 1984, veteran Nashville songwriter Whitey Shafer

played into Strait's Lone Star chauvinism with **Does Fort Worth Ever Cross Your Mind**. As a child, Shafer had lived briefly in Fort Worth and was sensitive to the city's "Cowtown" image, which supposedly made it inferior to Dallas, its more sophisticated neighbor. Shafer had the first three lines and the melody when his wife at the time, Darlene, thought up the title phrase (thus earning herself co-writing credit). Keith Whitley recorded the song first for a tape his producer, Don Gant, shopped in hopes of landing him a contract. RCA signed Whitley but didn't like the song, so it wasn't included on his debut album—but his cut was used by Shafer as a demo to sell Strait on the tune.

Naomi Judd was 38 and her daughter, Wynonna, 20 when they got their first record deal on a fluke. Naomi, a nurse, treated producer Brent Maher's daughter for injuries sustained in a 1982 car wreck. Later, she gave the producer a copy of the duo's demo tape, and Maher loved it. **Mama He's Crazy** proved prophetic, according to Wynonna. She told one writer she had never much liked boys except as friends, though not long after she and her mom cut the tune, "I met a boy that became . . . well, you know the song. It became a true story."

Ricky Skaggs had come out of the fertile bluegrass scene in the Washington, D.C., area. He led Emmylou Harris' Hot Band in the late '70s before moving to Nashville in 1980 to work with the Whites and establish a solo career. His own fusion of acoustic and electric, traditional and contemporary was typified by **Country Boy**, which just happened to be his CB handle. Skaggs drove the theme home even further when he managed to corral both bluegrass founder Bill Monroe and New York City mayor Ed Koch for his video.

The old and the new coexisted peacefully on country radio. Merle Haggard, a traditionalist who rarely made concessions, was in the midst of a divorce from his wife and singing partner, Leona Williams. He couldn't have dramatized the split more convincingly than through his revival of Lefty Frizzell's **That's the Way Love Goes**, the title song from perhaps Hag's most painful album. Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson and Willie Nelson banded together for an impromptu album and wound up naming themselves after the title tune. **Highwayman**, written by Jimmy Webb. Hank Williams Jr.'s 1986 remake of his father's **Mind Your Own Business**, featuring guest vocals by Reba McEntire, Willie Nelson and Reverend Ike, was his

pointed warning to Nashville. Apparently the industry got the message. For the next two years, Hank Jr. won the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year award.

Alabama had gone country in 1980 only after failing to have any chart success as a rock band. By 1982, they had become the first self-contained group to win the Entertainer of the Year award. Under increasing criticism for their glossy harmonies and pop productions, Alabama began writing songs that more overtly glorified the working man, which helped them retain their country base. **Roll On (Eighteen Wheeler)** gave new life to the grand—though fading—tradition of the truckdriver song.

Blind singer-pianist Ronnie Milsap had launched his career with an R & B sound in the Ray Charles mold, but he didn't enjoy much success until going country in 1973; four years later, he was CMA Entertainer of the Year. Milsap's **Lost in the Fifties Tonight (In the Still of the Night)** is a refashioning of the Five Satins' 1956 doo-wop chestnut. This song first appeared on his second volume of greatest hits, and was such a smash that it also became the title song of his next album.

Mel McDaniel's **Baby's Got Her Blue Jeans On** was less obviously

inspired by a 1956 olde, Little Richard's *The Girl Can't Help It*, the title song of a rock exploitation flick starring Jayne Mansfield. Songwriter Bob McDill was intrigued by the idea of a woman so attractive and so innocent that she couldn't be held responsible for inadvertently stopping traffic—the theme of the Mansfield movie. After carrying the guitar lick and melody around in his head for a year, McDill settled on the blue-jeans motif because Conway Twitty had used it so effectively on *Tight Fittin' Jeans* in 1981. Dan Seals, who was half of the '70s folk-pop duo England Dan and John Ford Coley, also had good luck with a '50s rock motif in **Bop**.

Rosanne Cash, Johnny Cash's daughter, was in the midst of a period of intensive self-examination prompted by motherhood, marital problems with Rodney Crowell, and drug rehabilitation when she cut the harrowing *Rhythm and Romance* album that included rocker Tom Petty's **Never Be You**. In so doing, she brought the country-pop fusion into the mid-'80s with a vengeance.

—John Marthland

## DISCOGRAPHY

\*Indicates highest *Billboard* country chart position

**1. Guitars, Cadillacs** Dwight Yoakam • Music and lyrics by Dwight Yoakam. Warner-Tamerlane Pub. Corp. *o/b/o*: Cool Dust West Music. BMI. ©1985 Warner Bros. Records Inc. Reprise 28688. Produced under license from Warner Bros. Records Inc. No. 4\*

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George Strait

