Book Review

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BASEBALL AND COUNTRY COURT, Columbia, MD 21045-2424


When I first became entranced with baseball (1946), I also discovered The Grand Ole Opry, which was broadcast all the way from Nashville to New York via the 50,000-watt WSM. So when I learned there was a book published that discussed these two cultures, I was eager to learn how they intertwined. Sadly, however, after reading this little volume, I’m still uncertain of the effects each had on the other.

Cusic took a different approach by showing the similarities between the parallel development of baseball and country music in the first part of the 20th century. Both had their roots in England (rounders and British folk songs) and were affected by immigration and assimilation, the struggle between labor and management (the reserve clause was similar to the recording contract), the quest for social acceptance and respect, the introduction of radio and television, the role of advertising and marketing, the myth and nature of heroes (Babe Ruth and Jimmie Rodgers), the introduction of the Latino market, and wealth in American society. Cusic maintains that baseball and country music both evolved from entertainment for the white working class to entertainment for the middle class. He even shows the similarities between night games and evening concerts as a way of broadening the appeal of both cultures. He makes a stretch by noting that the development of the interstate highway system benefited country music artists when traveling the country and baseball fans when traveling long distances to ball games.

Cusic notes that the Nashville Vols of the Southern Association were an accomplished minor-league team in the 1930s, just as Nashville was coming to be known as “Music City U.S.A.” The current minor-league team in the city is called the Nashville Sounds, a tribute to the country music industry. Cusic writes (p.113) that the “Nashville Sound” (country music “concentrated on creating a smoother sound”, exchanging the twangs and rhinestone suits for singers dressed in sports coats and tuxes) and the “crossovers” to rock and roll in the 1960s led country music to emerge “as the music of the middle class”, just as “baseball had made this move by the early 1960s, becoming the sport of the American middle class.”

Country music began in the South, a major source of big-league ballplayers who grew up on country music during the Depression and post-World War II years. After baseball established its Hall of Fame in 1939, the Country Music Association two decades later established its own hall of fame, based on the idea of baseball’s shrine. Cusic concludes his treatise (p.146): “Coming from a working-class background and ending up on top of the world is the American dream. Baseball and country music both deliver that dream, and you can’t get more American than that.”

Maybe so, but I was still searching for a direct relationship between these two enterprises. Was it Dizzy Dean singing “Wabash Cannonball” on Game of the Week? Mickey Mantle crooning Hank Williams songs in the clubhouse?

Some country music stars were accomplished ballplayers: Charley Pride (Negro leagues pitcher who had a tryout with the California Angels), Roy Acuff (career cut short by sunstroke), Billy Ray Cyrus (attended college on a baseball scholarship), Jim Reeves (played minor-league ball in the Cardinals organization), Garth Brooks (participated in spring training with the Padres and Mets), and Bill Monroe. Ah, yes, Monroe, the creator of bluegrass music, formed a baseball team made up of his bandmates who, before concerts, played exhibition games against several minor-league teams. Writes Cusic (p.55-56): “Because he was so infatuated with baseball, Monroe often made his decisions about hiring musicians for his band with additional consideration based on how well they played ball. Banjo player Stringbean was a good pitcher, which added to his value as a musician.” Monroe conceded that, if it hadn’t been for his weak eyesight, “I [would] have liked to be a baseball player. I could hit good and could’ve been a fair player.”

The connection between these two institutions is tenuous. True, singing cowboy Gene Autry was an avid baseball fan (he welcomed major-league ballplayers backstage during his performances) and his plans to secure major-league baseball in Los Angeles was crushed when Pearl Harbor was attacked; he had to wait another 20 years. During World War II, pop singer Bing Crosby (later part owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates) recorded several country songs, which took the music to a larger audience. Eddy Arnold invested in the Nashville Vols, as did Conway Twitty in the Nashville Sounds. Country music songs concerning baseball include “I Saw It All on the Radio” and “Cheap Seats”. John Denver’s “Thank God I’m a Country Boy” is still played during the seventh-inning stretch in Baltimore. Otherwise, the book is a disappointment if one was hoping to learn how country music and baseball influenced each other. Could country music themes (trucks, railroads, prison, mama, getting drunk, chasing skirts) have any connection to early ballplayers?

Cusic is professor of music business at Belmont Univ. as well as a writer and songwriter in Nashville. His baseball acumen needs strengthening: he confused Organized Baseball with Major League Baseball (p.15), stated that the 1922 World Series went nine games (p.16), had the Giants winning the 1923 World Series (p.16) and the Browns winning the 1945 American League pennant (p.73), missnamed the Southern Association as the Southern League in 1939 and 1940 (p.45, 57, 58), referred to Terry Moore as Terry Martin (p.76), stated (p.76) that Harry Walker singled Slaughter home in the 1946 World Series (Walker was credited with a double), misspelled Bill Bevans’ name (p.100), misspelled Ebbets Field (p.122), and really screwed up 1951 baseball history (p.94) by claiming that Thomson hit his homer with two outs, that “Ralph” Hodges screamed “The Giants win the pennant!”, and that the Yankees won the World Series in five games.

The book contains brief notes, a bibliographical essay, a bibliography, and a detailed index. The binding is very tight, impossible to keep the book open without clamping down on it.