

“Carnegie Hall Concert with Buck Owens and His Buckaroos”—Buck Owens and His Buckaroos (1966)

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Essay by Scott B. Bomar (guest post) *



Original album



Original label



Buck Owens and His Buckaroos

In the fall of 1965, Buck Owens was the biggest country star in the world. He was halfway through a string of sixteen consecutive #1 singles on the country chart in the industry-leading “Billboard” magazine, and had just been invited to appear at New York City’s prestigious Carnegie Hall. Already designated a National Historic Landmark, the esteemed venue had hosted Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Gershwin, Bernstein, and Ellington. Owens recognized the honor of being asked, but instructed his manager, Jack McFadden, to decline the offer. “When they first started talking about it, it scared me to death,” he admitted in a 1967 radio interview with Bill Thompson. Buck was worried the Manhattan audience wouldn’t be interested in his music, and he wanted to avoid the embarrassment of unsold tickets. McFadden pushed him to reconsider. When Ken Nelson, Owens’ producer at Capitol Records, suggested they record the performance and release it as his first live album, Buck finally conceded.

Buck Owens’ journey to the top of the charts and the top of the bill at the most revered concert hall in the United States began in Sherman, Texas, where he was born Alvis Edgar Owens, Junior in 1929. By 1937, the Owens family was headed for a new life in California, but they wound up settling in Mesa, Arizona, when a broken trailer hitch derailed their plan. As the family scrambled to make a living picking crops or doing other manual labor, Buck swore he’d find a way to build a better life. Mastering several instruments, he soon began supplementing his wages by performing with local bands.

In 1951, Owens moved to California, settling in Bakersfield at the southern tip of the state’s agriculturally-rich San Joaquin Valley. He soon found work on the city’s burgeoning country music scene that grew up around the children of the refugees who fled to California to escape the dust and depression that plagued Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas in the 1930s.

Hired to play guitar in Bill Woods’ band at the legendary Blackboard Café, Buck was soon taking the microphone and building a solid local reputation as a first-rate vocalist and instrumentalist. He began writing songs and traveling 100 miles south to Los Angeles, where he

played guitar on a number of sessions for other artists at the Capitol Records studio. He recorded a handful of songs and released a few singles on the tiny Pep label, but success outside Bakersfield eluded him.

In 1957, Ken Nelson recognized his potential and signed Owens to an artist deal with Capitol Records. His first three singles flopped and Buck--who had by then relocated to Puyallup, Washington, where he co-owned a small radio station and performed with his own band--suggested they call it quits. Nelson was willing to keep trying and, by the early summer of 1959, "Second Fiddle" became a minor hit. The Top 10 single "Under Your Spell Again" soon followed.

While in Washington, Buck met Donald Ulrich, a teenage fiddle player who, using the name Don Rich, would become his guitarist, band leader, harmony singer, musical partner, and "right arm," as Owens frequently described him. Buck ultimately returned to Bakersfield and, with Don by his side, began scoring hits with such songs as "Above and Beyond" and "Under the Influence of Love." Once his streak of #1 singles began with "Act Naturally" in 1963, Buck continually reaffirmed his allegiance to Bakersfield, choosing to remain in California rather than operating from the country music industry's established headquarters in Nashville.

Unlike the majority of commercially successful Nashville performers who typically relied on the same small pool of studio musicians on their records, Buck both toured *and* recorded with his own band. By 1964, his albums were credited to Buck Owens and His Buckaroos, a name that was suggested by fellow Bakersfield musician and future country superstar Merle Haggard during his brief tenure as one of Buck's band members in the early 1960s. Eschewing strings, background choruses, and other adornments popular in country music at the time, Buck and the Buckaroos honed an exciting no-frills honky-tonk sound with hints of the energy of rock and roll, and plenty of unapologetic twang. Though a number of musicians would come in and out of the group over the years, most fans regard the classic era as the 1964-1966 lineup of Don Rich, bassist Doyle Holly, pedal steel guitarist Tom Brumley, and drummer Willie Cantu.

These were the Buckaroos who were backing Buck when they set the date to headline a package show at Carnegie Hall on March 25, 1966. As the performance drew closer, the 2,700 seat venue sold out, allaying Buck's initial fears about ticket sales. The usually self-assured Owens then grew concerned about whether or not the capacity crowd would appreciate his music. "We were going to be playing in front of a bunch of New Yorkers," he related in his posthumous autobiography, assembled by author Randy Poe from Owens' taped recollections. "Those folks were known to be pretty selective about what they thought was a good performance." Ernest Tubb had headlined a Grand Ole Opry package show at Carnegie Hall in 1947, followed by a second Opry troupe in 1961 that included Faron Young, Jim Reeves, Marty Robbins, Bill Monroe, and Patsy Cline. The bluegrass duo Flatt and Scruggs appeared there in 1962 and 1964. But the hallowed hall was still primarily associated with opera rather than the Opry, and Buck understood that he would be regarded as a de facto ambassador for the entire country genre.

During the 1960s industry professionals were uniquely preoccupied with the music's acceptance in the cultural mainstream. The Nashville-based Country Music Association was founded in 1958 as the first trade group organized for the sole purpose of promoting a single genre of music.

One of the early objectives of the CMA was persuading radio stations to consider country programming. In September of 1965, Hackensack, New Jersey's WJRZ switched its format, and became the first all-country station to service New York City. Their promotion of both Buck Owens and the entire country field no doubt contributed to the successful ticket sales for the Carnegie Hall concert.

Likewise, country fans were swept up in the movement to earn respect for "our music," as countless letters-to-the-editor in publications such as "Country Song Roundup" revealed. Fans debated about the ways country should be represented in the wider cultural conversation. Taking great pains to combat persistent stereotypes of backwater hillbillies, there were often impassioned debates regarding how far the genre should or shouldn't go to make the music more palatable to a wide audience. In 1965, a series of letters appeared in "Music City News" under the heading "Country Music Battle Rages On." For months, readers weighed in with their opinions about balancing modern and traditional sounds.

It was in the context of this debate that Buck Owens took out a full page ad in the magazine with his "Pledge to Country Music." Assuring fans of his loyalties, he declared, "I shall sing no song that is not a country song. I shall make no record that is not a country record. I refuse to be known as anything but a country singer. I am proud to be associated with country music. Country music and country music fans made me what I am today. And I shall not forget it."

When Owens appeared at Carnegie Hall, fans were thrilled, noting that an uncompromising country artist who wasn't seeking pop stardom earned enough respect to perform at Carnegie Hall without changing his music or pandering to pop tastes. It was regarded by most country fans as a victory, not only for Owens, but for the entire musical community to which they were so deeply committed.

By the day of the show, Buck Owens was at the top of his game. At the start of 1966, he had replaced the Dodge camper he and the band had been traveling in and acquired a \$60,000 tour bus. By March, he had purchased Bakersfield's KUZZ radio, further expanding Buck Owens Enterprises, which already included a music publishing firm, a booking agency, and various real estate holdings. Additionally, he finalized a deal that month to star in his own syndicated television show. Filming began in Oklahoma City as Buck, his band, and their entourage of support acts stopped en route from Bakersfield to New York for the Carnegie Hall performance.

Once in New York, photographer Ken Veeder snapped a photo of the band standing on the corner of 7th Avenue and West 57th Street with the storied concert house looming in the background. Buck was wearing a flashy yellow Western suit designed and intricately embroidered by Hollywood tailor Nathan Turk. He was flanked by the Buckaroos who wore matching blue Turk suits with the same design. "I didn't know how well we were going to perform in front of that audience," Buck joked years later, "but at least I knew we were sure going to look good." The photo would become the cover photo of the album.

Shortly after 10:00 pm, following a variety of warm-up acts, WJRZ deejay Lee Arnold introduced Buck. The band ripped into "Act Naturally," his first #1 hit, which was later recorded by The Beatles, who made their own New York concert debut at Carnegie Hall two years prior.

The crowd cheered so loudly that the band had to extend the introduction before the audience quieted down enough for Buck to sing.

Over the next 45 minutes, Buck and the Buckaroos gave a stunning performance, showcasing a variety of material. They played the #1 hits “Together Again” and “Love’s Gonna Live Here,” before launching into a four song medley, that included his #1 hit “Only You (Can Break My Heart),” as well as “Cryin’ Time.” Though the latter was originally a B-side for Buck, Ray Charles’ version of the Owens-penned ballad peaked at #6 on the “Billboard” pop chart the previous month. Owens wanted to make sure audiences knew whose song it was.

Barely pausing, Buck moved into another medley, hitting the highlights of “I Don’t Care (Just As Long As You Love Me),” “My Heart Skips a Beat,” and “Gonna Have Love.” The first two had been #1 hits in 1964. The latter was a Top 10 that Buck co-wrote with fellow Bakersfield performer Red Simpson, who also appeared on the Carnegie Hall package show.

Overwhelmed with the audience response, Owens paused after the second medley. A wide grin spread across his face as he told the crowd, “You guys have got to be the best audience we ever played for.” He performed his current single, “Waitin’ in Your Welfare Line,” before introducing the band as Dashing Doyle Holly, Wonderful Willie Cantu, Tender Tom Brumley, and Dangerous Don Rich. Cantu, a Texas native, was only nineteen. “It was a once in a lifetime deal,” he recalled in 2014. “I remember my junior high band director telling us, ‘If you can make it to Carnegie Hall then you know you’ve accomplished something.’ It was the place that everyone aspired to. People like Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Rubenstein played there, so it was significant to me. I remember setting up my drums and thinking, ‘Gene Krupa played here with Benny Goodman’s orchestra.’ Gene Krupa was one of my first idols.”

After the introductions, the band launched into “Buckaroo,” their signature instrumental song, before bassist Doyle Holly took the lead vocal on a version of the cowboy standard “The Streets of Laredo.” They flawlessly executed a dynamic version of “I’ve Got a Tiger By the Tail,” which was arguably Buck’s most popular song.

A comedy routine called “Fun ‘n’ Games with Don & Doyle” included cornpone humor intermixed with impressions of Tex Ritter, Ernest Tubb, and Johnny Cash. That portion of the show--along with a version of the Beatles’ “Twist and Shout” (complete with shaggy wigs)--was left off the original live album, though both selections appeared on subsequent CD releases.

Buck and the band wrapped up the show with a final medley that began with his first four Top 5 hits--in the order they were released--and concluded with two cover songs, Orville Couch’s “Hello Trouble,” and Terry Fell’s “Truck Driving Man.” Fell had been an early encourager and mentor to Owens, and his song had also become the signature tune for Bill Woods, the Bakersfield band leader who gave Buck his first big opportunity on the local scene. Choosing the latter to end the closing medley was likely a personal nod to the two men who helped him early in his career.

“You’re without a doubt the warmest audience we ever had the opportunity to perform for,” Buck told the crowd before leaving the stage. It wasn’t an empty compliment. “I think it turned

out to be my proudest moment,” he said of the Carnegie Hall show in an interview with CMT.com more than 35 years later.

Four months after the show, Capitol Records released “Carnegie Hall Concert with Buck Owens and His Buckaroos,” which climbed to #1 on the country album chart and crossed over to the broader-based pop album charts. Without overdubs or editing, the LP perfectly captured the band in their prime. “There was no fixin’ on that whole album, and I don’t think there’s a mistake on it,” Tom Brumley told journalist Rich Kienzle. Buck agreed. “Not one of us had hit a wrong note, missed a beat, or flubbed a single word,” he elaborated. “We’d literally recorded a perfect album in less than fifty minutes.”

One of the most gratifying aspects of the Carnegie Hall triumph for Buck was that he had the opportunity to present country music as a legitimate art form. Though Buck made corny country humor a part of his show, he took pains to present himself professionally and was always conscious about combatting the negative images of country performers that continued to linger in the popular imagination. What he craved was respect for his music, and country music as a whole. “All my life,” he confessed, “I’ve wanted to represent country music with more dignity, more integrity—more class.”

“Listen to an inspired man render the greatest performance of his life,” WJRZ Program Director Ed Neilson wrote in the liner notes on the back of the original “Carnegie Hall” LP. And Owens agreed with the assessment for the rest of his life, often telling those close to him that Carnegie Hall was the best show he ever played. Though he would become more famous for his role on the “Hee Haw” television series, Buck believed that he was at his best when he was on stage with his faithful Buckaroos. In 1996, he opened a multi-million dollar restaurant and performance venue in Bakersfield, where he personally entertained audiences every weekend. He died in his sleep on March 25, 2006, hours after what turned out to be his final performance at the Crystal Palace. It was 40 years to the day after his triumphant appearance at Carnegie Hall.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.