

“Wabash Cannon Ball”—Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans (1936)

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Essay by John W. Rumble (guest post)*



Roy Acuff

When Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans recorded “Wabash Cannon Ball” in Chicago, on October 21, 1936, he had not yet joined the Grand Ole Opry, and his election to the Country Music Hall of Fame lay 26 years in the future. At this point he was working schoolhouses around Knoxville, where he also broadcast over local radio stations WNOX and WROL. A WROL announcer, Alan Stout, had come up with the name “Crazy Tennesseans,” which seemed to suit the band’s reliance on novelty tunes and comedy, as well as its sometimes frenetic onstage showmanship. In addition, Stout was probably linking Acuff’s band with the popular laxative Crazy Water Crystals, made by a Texas company that sponsored country radio shows on stations ranging from Texas to Pennsylvania.

Born in Maynardville, Tennessee, September 15, 1903, Acuff was the son of a farmer who ran the town’s post office and also pastored at a local Baptist church. In his youth, Roy had been surrounded by folksongs and fiddle tunes performed by neighbors and family members. His family owned recordings by various country artists and he’d learned hymns in church and in singing schools run by traveling instructors. After the Acuffs moved to Fountain City, a Knoxville suburb, Roy liked to copy his sister, Sue, as she practiced the exercises her voice teacher had assigned.

Although he finished high school, where he distinguished himself as an athlete, Acuff turned down a scholarship offer from East Tennessee’s Carson-Newman College. Instead, he worked a series of temporary jobs while also playing semi-pro baseball and boxing in amateur bouts. In 1929, major-league baseball scouts had recruited him for training camp in Florida, but sunstroke led to his collapse during a game, and ultimately to a nervous breakdown.

While recuperating at home, Acuff practiced his fiddle on the front porch. Passing by one day, a neighbor known as “Doc” Hauer invited him to join a medicine-show tour of the East Tennessee, western Virginia, and West Virginia. Acuff and other musicians drew crowds with free entertainment, setting up Hauer’s pitches for his home-made all-purpose tonic. “Supposedly,” said Acuff, “it would cure everything from headaches to hangnails.” Now afire with the thrill of performing, Acuff began playing square dances with other local musicians, and later worked both radio and personal appearances with the Crazy Tennesseans which was then comprised of Jess Easterday (guitar and mandolin), Clell Summey (dobro), Red Jones (upright bass), and Sam “Dynamite” Hatcher (harmonica).

Impressed with the band’s radio programs, executive W. R. Calaway brought them to Chicago in the fall of 1936 to record their first sessions for the American Recording Company, whose family of labels included Conqueror and Vocalion. On the band’s rendition of “Wabash Cannon Ball”—a 1903 song by William Kindt based on older train songs including J. A. Rolf’s “The Great Rock Island Route”—Hatcher handled the solo vocal, while Acuff contributed the steam whistle effects evoking the sounds of a passing locomotive. The number quickly became one of the group’s standards, which Acuff would carry forward throughout his career.

Acuff continued to set his sights on the “Grand Ole Opry,” which reached from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico due to WSM’s 50,000-watt signal and federally-designated clear-channel (channels free from interference by signals from other stations).

The singer was frustrated by repeated refusals from “Opry” boss George D. Hay, until promoter J. L. Frank helped Acuff land a guest spot in 1937. Even during this performance, however, he knew he wasn’t impressing Hay or the audience, and according to “Opry” member Alton Delmore, the aspiring musician came off the stage looking heartsick. With Frank’s help, Acuff snagged a second guest appearance early in 1938. This time, sacks of letters praising his earnest performance of the gospel song “Great Speckle Bird” convinced station manager Harry Stone and his brother David, then head of the WSM’s booking department, to bring Acuff onboard as a permanent addition to the cast. According to David Stone, it was Frank who advised Acuff to change his band name from Crazy Tennesseans to the more dignified Smoky Mountain Boys.

No sooner had Acuff and crew joined the “Opry” roster than they began quarrelling among themselves about whether to keep Tin Pan Alley pop chestnuts such as “Yes, Sir, She’s My Baby” in their set lists. There was also sharp debate about whether Acuff should be the group’s front man. Early in 1939, Clell Summey, Red Jones, and Dynamite Hatcher left, and Acuff replaced them with two of his Knoxville buddies, guitarist Lonnie Wilson and Dobro player Beecher “Pete” Kirby (later known as Bashful Brother Oswald). Easterday remained, shifting to upright bass.

By now WSM was placing Acuff at the center of a growing star system that helped the station win larger audiences and attract advertisers in the face of competition from Chicago’s WLS “National Barn Dance” and similar shows broadcast from Cincinnati, St. Louis, Des Moines, Atlanta, and Knoxville. “Hear the songs ‘Great Speckle Bird’ and ‘Wabash Cannon Ball,’”

WSM ads boasted. As time went on, Acuff had to perform those two numbers every week or risk offending his fans.

As a budding “Grand Ole Opry” favorite, Acuff was in good company. Frank had helped his son-in-law Pee Wee King bring his Golden West Cowboys to the cast in 1936, and, in October 1939, Bill Monroe successfully auditioned for Hay and Harry and David Stone. Ernest Tubb, another Frank client, followed in 1943, the same year Eddy Arnold left King’s band to become a WSM star in his own right.

Through the World War II years and beyond, Acuff relied on “Wabash Cannon Ball” to stir his growing audience, not only at the Opry but at personal appearances throughout the nation. In 1939, the prestigious Columbia label bought ARC and Acuff became one of Columbia’s most prominent country acts.

During 1942 and 1943, a national musicians’ union called a strike against the major record labels, and after his sessions of early June 1942, Acuff didn’t record again until December 1944.

Through 1946, Acuff recorded mostly new material, including several songs penned by Fred Rose, his partner in the newly formed Acuff-Rose music publishing venture. But for his January 28, 1947, session, held at Hollywood radio station KNX, Acuff and his producer, Art Satherley, decided to include “Wabash Cannon Ball.” Naturally, Acuff sang the vocal, backed by Velma Williams on bass and stalwarts Kirby, Easterday, and Wilson.

The late 1940s were a time of transition for Roy Acuff. When he left WSM in a salary dispute in early 1946, R.J. Reynolds and WSM brought in smooth-singing, broadly appealing Red Foley to replace him as headliner of the “Prince Albert Show,” the Opry’s NBC segment. Acuff eventually returned to front the Royal Crown Cola portion of the program, but in the late 1940s, his hits began to wane. Honky tonky sounds and electric instruments were coming into their own, overshadowing Acuff’s older acoustic sound. On the other hand, Acuff-Rose Publications became enormously successful as the publisher of hits by Hank Williams, Red Foley, the Louvin Brothers, Carl Smith, Little Jimmy Dickens, and many other artists. Acuff also made his first international tour in 1949 with an Opry ensemble that entertained military personnel at US bases in Europe. Later travels took him to Alaska, Korea, Japan, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean.

After leaving Columbia in 1951, Acuff recorded for Capitol, Decca, MGM, and, beginning in 1957, his own Hickory label, founded in 1953 with Fred Rose and Rose’s son, Wesley, who was also general manager of Acuff-Rose.

Although his record sales were not impressive—they generally sold in the 25,000 range—Acuff’s tradition-based sound and songs won younger fans during the folk music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. He further raised his profile through his contributions to the 1972 United Artists release “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” featuring the Nitty Gritty Dirt band with country artists including Mother Maybelle Carter, Jimmy Martin, Doc Watson, and others. For this landmark, three-LP set, which introduced millions of college-age listeners to an older generation of country stars, Acuff recorded “Wabash Cannon Ball” along with “Wreck on the

Highway,” “Pins and Needles in My Heart,” “The Precious Jewel,” and other classics of his repertoire.

Appearances on the “Hee Haw” TV series and various televised specials also kept Acuff in the public eye, but his principal showcase remained the “Grand Ole Opry,” whose audiences never tired of hearing him perform “Wabash Cannon Ball” and “Great Speckle Bird.” He remained the program’s leading elder statesman until his death in 1992.

Over the course of his long career, Acuff received numerous honors. In 1987, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, the organization that bestows the Grammys. In 1991, Acuff was honored at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., for his contribution to the performing arts. That same year, US President George H.W. Bush presented him with the National Medal of Arts, placing him in the company of such recipients as Eddy Arnold, Harry Belafonte, Dave Brubeck, Aaron Copeland, Agnes DeMille, Bob Dylan, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Vladimir Horowitz, Harper Lee, and Gregory Peck.

John W. Rumble has published numerous articles on country music. He has also contributed liner notes to many albums and box sets, including the Grammy-nominated “From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music” (Warner Bros., 1998). He serves as Senior Historian for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

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