

BRING BACK '90s COUNTRY? YOUR WISH MAY COME TRUE



Pictured (L-R): Kix Brooks, Reba McEntire, and Ronnie Dunn

By LB Cantrell

Any fan of country music knows the iconic era of the '90s. In what is now known as the boom of commercial country music, with stars such as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain making record-breaking sales, it's no surprise that the golden age of the genre has influenced today's country stars.

In the last decade, the appreciation of '90s country has been very evident. Last fall, Spotify published data that showed just how popular the music had become on the platform.

According to unique user data from Spotify, published in September of 2021, U.S. streams of their '90s Country playlist grew 150% since 2018, and 70% among Gen Z users in that time. There were also 89 million playlists from Gen Z users containing '90s country tracks. Even more interesting, as many fans between ages 19-24 listen to Spotify's '90s Country playlist as those fans over 45.

According to Spotify, albums from The Chicks (*Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*); Shania Twain (*Come On Over* and *The Woman In Me*); Alan Jackson (*Who I Am* and *A Lot About Livin' (And A Little 'Bout Love)*); Tim McGraw (*Everywhere*); and George Strait (*Strait Out Of The Box*, *Pure Country* and *Blue Clear Sky*) are among the top 10 most popular '90s country albums for Gen Z listeners.

The Grand Ole Opry is currently celebrating the iconic decade with their Opry Loves the '90s experience, which includes a new interactive tour exhibition, special in-show Opry programming, '90s-themed Opry Plaza Parties and surprise artist collaborations celebrating '90s country music. The popular experience runs through the end of 2022 and continues across other Opry

Entertainment Group properties including WSM Radio, Circle Network and Opry.com.

"It's the cycle of music," shares Co-President of Warner Music Nashville, Cris Lacy, regarding the surge of popularity for '90s country. "It's the music that millennials and Gen Z heard their parents listening to. I lean into things that my folks listened to when I was a kid, so I think that's a piece of it."

She adds, "I also think '90s music was really fun. If you look at The Chicks, Faith Hill, George Strait, Alan Jackson, Garth Brooks, Reba McEntire, Joe Diffie and Shania Twain, there was a lot of fun music. It was positive and uplifting. There were certainly meaningful songs, but there were also songs that felt light and carefree. I think we all need that right now. Those two things are converging—the state of the world for the last couple years and the age of younger listeners and what they grew up on."

TikTok has been a big part of '90s country music's resurgence. Older songs such as Brooks & Dunn's "Neon Moon," Reba McEntire's "I'm A Survivor," Randy Travis' "Forever and Ever, Amen" and George Strait's "Carrying Your Love With Me" have gone viral on the app, pointing users to find more gems from the iconic catalogs of '90s country music.

"TikTok and other social media have played a big role in all of this. We saw that correlation between Randy Travis having this multi-million-view TikTok moment, and then moving those folks who maybe didn't exist in this world onto streaming, looking for him," Lacy says. "It's introducing folks who maybe didn't grow up with it to a whole new brand of country music."



Pictured (L-R): Alan Jackson. Photo: Alan Jackson Archives; Shania Twain, Photo: Shania Twain Archives; George Strait. Photo: George Strait Archives

With the appreciation and popularity of '90s country growing, it's no wonder that songwriters, artists, and industry members have taken notice. Over the past few years, several artists have started covering '90s country songs in their live shows, referenced the decade as a key influence in their music, and included stylish '90s country merch as part of their live show wardrobe. Some have released singles referencing the decade, such as Walker Hayes with "'90s Country" and Lauren Alaina with "Ladies In The '90s."

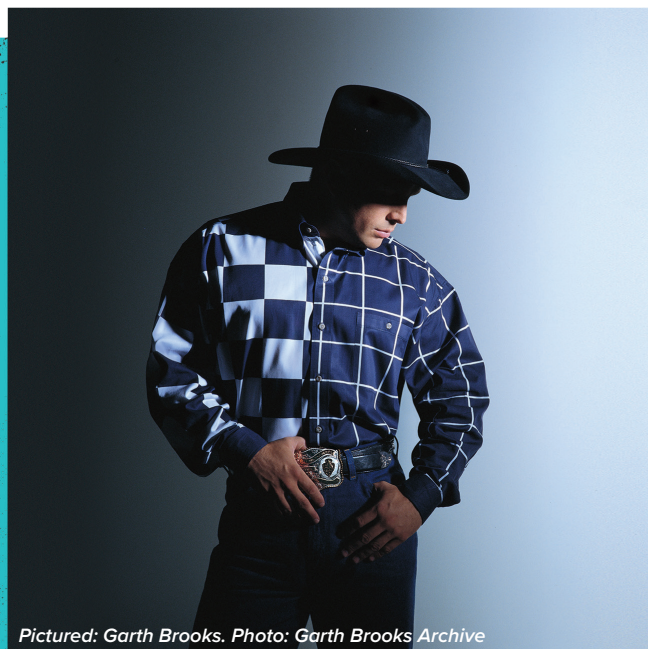
But none, so far, have done it quite like Warner Music Nashville recording artist Cole Swindell. His new hit single, "She Had Me At Heads Carolina," has catapulted since its release in May. The tune samples Jo Dee Messina's iconic 1996 hit, "Heads Carolina, Tails California" with the original songwriters Tim Nichols and Mark D. Sanders credited as writers alongside Swindell, Ashley Gorley, Thomas Rhett and Jesse Frasure.

The track has exploded for Swindell, reaching the Top 20 on the *Billboard* Country Airplay chart in just six weeks. At his performance of the new song at Nissan Stadium for CMA Fest, nearly everyone in the entire stadium jumped to their feet and sang along, after it had only been out for a few short weeks. "She Had Me At Heads Carolina" appears on Swindell's recently released *Stereotype* album, and its power was clear from the start.

"Cole will put a couple of new songs in his set during a live show, but artists don't typically put a lot of new ones in because the crowd hasn't had time to get familiar. But I'm not joking, people will sing it as if they've heard it a thousand times when he plays that song," shares Swindell's manager and President of KP Entertainment, Kerri Edwards. "It just kept doing that [at live shows] over and over again to the point where me, Cris and Cole were like, 'I don't think we have a choice on making this single three from *Stereotype*. Everyone's screaming what they want next.'"

As it does in any genre, once a trend is set with a hit song, we are likely to see more to follow.

"I've already heard several songs that have been pitched to me for other artists that are interpolations and some kind of version of this," Lacy shares. "Does it have to be special for people to do them? No. Does it have to be special for people to care? Yes. That's where ["She Had Me At Heads Carolina"] is such a beautiful blend because Cole truly listened to Jo Dee. She's one of his heroes. This is a genuine affinity for an artist that was a hero, that was a trail blazer. That's why it's so special."



Pictured: Garth Brooks. Photo: Garth Brooks Archive



Pictured: Jo Dee Messina. Photo: Jo Dee Messina Archive

Songwriters in Nashville are already hard at work on crafting up '90s country-inspired tunes—and, obviously, having a ball doing it.

The Opry recently partnered with Warner Chappell and Alicia Pruitt's Madfun Entertainment to host a 3-day Opry Loves '90s Writers Camp where a mix of '90s artists and hit songwriters paired to write with some of today's artists and songwriters. The goal of the camp was to write modern country songs that are

reminiscent of the '90s.

From day one of the camp, Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame member Rhett Akins—who has penned such iconic country hits as his own "That Ain't My Truck"—spoke about what makes '90s country so iconic.

"It's story-songs," Akins said. "Clever hooks and four minute songs. We weren't scared to go over the limit. On great songs like 'Don't Take The Girl,' if it needed that extra verse to tell the story, then the songwriters weren't scared to do it."

Hit songwriter Jessi Alexander highlighted that women in country music could benefit from the '90s resurgence.

She said, "With songwriting for girls in the '90s, the things they got to say and the stories they got to tell were limitless. There weren't many gender-specific songs. You could be an outlaw and be a female. Reba could sing through a man's perspective. The songwriting was so open."

As more and more artists lean into their '90s influence, we will undoubtedly see more story songs, more interpolations, and more fun in upcoming country releases. And for an industry that boomed in the '90s, executives and fans will likely welcome this exciting new trend in country music. **MR**



Pictured: The "Opry Loves The '90s" exhibit at The Grand Ole Opry. Photo: Chris Hollo for Grand Ole Opry