

# Tennessean Writer's Shots Ill-Informed And Ill-Conceived

You were attacked last week. If you work in, listen to, receive airplay on or aspire to receive airplay on Country radio, or if you derive a measure of your livelihood from any of the people categorized above, **Peter Cooper** and **The Tennessean** have declared that you and your efforts lack merit. If you're at all associated with country music and Country radio, it's important to understand just how fully a prominent Nashville media outlet has belittled your entire industry and community.

In his Tuesday "On Music" column (8/6), Cooper responded to Tom Petty's recent criticism of country with a defense of the genre that was to large degree thinly veiled

## EDITORIAL

cover for his own attack on Country radio. What Cooper and so

many others who love to complain fail to grasp is just how broad and intellectually empty that assault really is, and the extent to which it reveals a troubling low regard for others.

First, some background. Last Monday, RollingStone.com posted an interview with Petty in which he said, "Most of [country] reminds me of rock in the middle '80s where it become incredibly generic." This was after an onstage proclamation about the genre being "bad rock with fiddles."

Enter Cooper, who presumes to know how Petty listens to music and, naturally, what he *really* means: "He's trying to say that much of what he hears on the country radio isn't up to snuff with some of the geniuses who used to be on country radio. But his broad brush is making a mess of things."

Cooper then breaks out his own wide-bristle: "I'm just saying that defining country music by whatever's playing on the radio at the moment is both maddening and ridiculous." He goes on to prove he missed the elementary school lesson about not building things up by tearing others down as he cites some of his favorites on the fringes of the mainstream.

"Most of the above country musicians aren't on terrestrial, FM contemporary country radio," he writes. "Does that make country music any the lesser? No, it just makes country radio (even) less enjoyable (if that's possible)."

And he continues with this colossal mistake: "Country music doesn't need country radio anymore. We country fans have \$10 to spend at the door, and we have YouTube and iTunes and Ernest Tubbs Record Shops and the sense to stop complaining about what we don't have any reason to endure."

The primary and fatal flaw in much of music criticism regards the vocabulary of value. Cooper, Petty and so many others confuse not liking something with it being bad, unable to be enjoyed or otherwise lacking merit. If 70 million people are deliberately listening to, buying

albums of and tickets for – and seem generally pleased with – the mainstream music played on Country radio, doesn't that have value? And not just financially?

To argue otherwise is to say those fans have no taste and to invalidate their clearly expressed opinions. Evidently, Cooper has no problem condescending to millions of his fellow Americans and, by extension, mainstream country artists, labels, producers, songwriters, musicians and countless others who work tirelessly to reach those radio listeners.

The assertion that country music doesn't need Country radio is equally illogical and ignorant. First, it fails to recognize the intimate connection between radio and country music that traces from the origins of the *Grand Ole Opry* all the way up to the demonstrably strong relationship that endures today. Country music is Country radio. Country radio is country music. They developed together and are as inseparable as conjoined twins with one heart.

Second, it dismisses the vast economic impact Country radio makes on country music and Nashville. A songwriter himself, Cooper should understand the devastation that would be wrought on the music community if licensing revenue from Country radio suddenly stopped flowing. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. How many singles and albums would sell without airplay? How many seats would stand empty without an air personality touting the upcoming concert?

Since Cooper took it upon himself to explain Petty's argument, we'll do the same for Cooper. Perhaps he should have written, "Tom Petty and others who don't like mainstream country music can find artists and music more to their liking on the fringes of the genre. Here are some suggestions..."

Or maybe even, "The quality of music, country or otherwise, is in the eye of the beholder. The widespread and growing popularity of mainstream country music is a testament to how millions of Americans feel about the genre, even if Tom Petty doesn't quite get it." Unfortunately, it's probably too much to expect Cooper and *The Tennessean* to actually have country music's – and Nashville's – back. Instead, they took the opportunity to insult literally everyone who loves, makes and promotes mainstream country music.

In short, Peter Cooper is flat-out wrong about Country radio's importance to country music, guilty of the exact broad-brush generalizations he condemns and unconscionably condescending to millions of people who have directly and indirectly supported his city, his employer and his career. Further, his editors' willingness to publish such flawed logic and indiscriminate negativity about an immeasurably vital part of Nashville's commerce and culture – not to mention a vital part of American culture – is beyond comprehension.