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In the Age of the Algorithm, Roots Music Is Rising

Streaming services are helping revive America's most old-fashioned, undigital genre.

Charley Crockett, a rising star in the roots-music field, performing in Nashville, Ind., in May. Kristine Potter for The New York Times

By Carlo Rotella

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Billy Strings and Chris Thile were singing an old song called "Rabbit in a Log" at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Clouds of weedy smoke rolled up to the stage from below, and thunder echoed from the surrounding mountain peaks as the crowd of 7,000 nodded blissfully and trance-bopped in Dead-show fashion.

The song, also known as "Feast Here Tonight," is about extracting a rabbit from a hollow log when you don't have a dog (you'll need to fashion a brier snare), cooking it over an open fire and finding a place to lay your weary bones for the night. So it's about the techniques and outlook of the hobo, redolent of atavistic physical competence and the unforgiving facts of life. Like a lot of

old-timey music heard in our disorienting present, it sounds like equipment for living, shaped and road-tested by hard times. Bill Monroe, the main force behind the merger of Scottish fiddle tunes with blues and gospel that came to be called bluegrass, recorded the song in the 1930s, but its roots extend back to earlier folk traditions in the South.

It carries a considerable payload of history, and it also offers an occasion to shred. Billy Strings, who is already regarded at age 32 as an all-time great flat picker, grimaced in concentration as he laid down dense, twisting skeins of guitar notes. Thile, who is known as a wizard of the mandolin able to play anything with anybody, was all smiles and seemed to do everything without effort: impossibly swift runs, chordal washes, daring harmonic touches. Billy Strings told me later that his immediate reaction to hearing Thile warm up on mandolin backstage was “I better get some coffee.”

But Billy Strings was the main attraction. Born William Lee Apostol, he is one of the biggest names in the world of roots music and still getting bigger. He consistently sells out arenas, and it seems just a matter of time before he moves up to stadiums. He has been wildly successful in attracting fans of all ages, including devotees of jam bands, heavy metal and other genres beyond the roots-music scene. He told me, “I’ll throw in some diminished runs for metalheads; you know, put some horns on it,” referring to the devil-horns finger gesture favored by fans of heavy metal, who lap up the ominous minor sound of diminished chords.

Billy Strings, whose marquee turn with Thile opened the Telluride festival last June, was one of a cohort of youngish, proven-yet-still-rising stars who converged there that also included Molly Tuttle, Charley Crockett and Sierra Ferrell. They are all big fish in the expanding pond of the roots-music scene who have been testing the vaster waters of the mainstream — showing up all over late-night TV, movie soundtracks and music awards shows. Endlessly in demand as guest stars on other artists’ songs, they are both generating and riding the cultural momentum as American popular music makes one of its regular cyclical swings back toward acoustic instruments and natural voices, the values of community and craft and a heightened sense of connection to the soulful experience and hard-won wisdom of those who lived in the past. Like crafting and sewing and other embodied competences also making a comeback, music handmade by flesh-and-blood humans on instruments made of wood and metal has acquired special added meaning. It offers a strong contrast to the disembodied digital reality that more and more of us inhabit more and more of the time.

Top: Billy Strings, right, warming up with bandmates backstage at the Outlaw Music Festival in Wheatland, Calif. Above: The band onstage after their performance. Kristine Potter for The New York Times

"We're living in a very algorithmically driven world," says David Macias, president of Thirty Tigers, a hybrid record label and management company that gives Americana, alt-country and blues artists extensive control and ownership of their work. He argues that the algorithms, which sort the listening public into ever-more-individualized niches, can cut both ways: They can introduce you to new artists, but they can also "rob you of the variety of emotional experience." A result, he says, is "a hunger for a more authentic view, a more definite emotional experience than commercial country often provides." Roots music has to make its way in from the outside, Macias says, but "this type of music, riding a wave, could become mainstream. Right now, commercial country is still dominant, but momentum is growing."

More than one musician I talked to in Telluride told me that "country is cool again," usually in a sarcastic tone that dismissed anybody who needs the prevailing cultural winds to shift before deciding it's safe to take an interest in country music. But the expansion of country's footprint and audience is more than a blip of popularity. On the pop end, where Taylor Swift got her start and Beyoncé, Ringo Starr and face-tattooed rappers all flourish now, mainstream country continues its advance into the domains of pop and rock while deepening its awkward embrace of hip-hop. I asked Macias and other music-business experts to help me understand what's happening on the roots end, where music arising from folk practices mixes with earlier forms of pop music that no longer command the market share they once enjoyed. Though roots is "a very slippery idea," as Macias says, the term makes an implicit claim that the music matters not just because of mass popularity but also because it carries cultural memory.

"It's undeniable that something's happening," says Keith Levy, an agent who represents Sierra Ferrell, the neotraditional country star Tyler Childers and other roots-music artists. "Because of streaming, audiences keep getting younger, and young people's taste has come around again to music made with banjos and guitars. Taste is on a wheel, and every 10 years or so, the wheel turns in this direction."

In Levy's view, the consequences of the shift show up not only at the level of stars like Childers and Zach Bryan, both of whom started selling out arenas and showing up on the Billboard and Spotify hot-country hit lists even before they got any mainstream country-radio airplay, but also at the level of working artists who make a good living despite not being household names and having no hit songs or radio presence. "There are not many Taylor Swifts, but there are a lot of Caamps and Shakey Graveses," Levy told me. "There might be more artists like that in this kind of music than in any other, and now, thanks to technology, they

can each have their own cult, they can talk directly to their fans, to the detriment of gatekeepers." And there are more ways than ever for an artist to break through: social media, streaming platforms, SiriusXM, festivals like Stagecoach. "For a long time, we had radio telling people what to listen to," he says, "but we no longer live in a monoculture."

Levy stresses the interplay between these longer-wave cycles in taste and technology and the sudden effect of the pandemic on how listeners find and consume music. "In 2020, rural listeners, especially, hadn't really adapted to the digital medium, but in a 40-to-60-day period during the start of the pandemic they started paying for Spotify subscriptions." Music fans also became more used to unslick videos on YouTube and TikTok that give off what he calls "field-recording vibes." He cites the example of Sierra Ferrell's "In Dreams," which has 11 million views on GemsOnVHS, a YouTube channel that collects informal acoustic performances.

The shift in music delivery went hand in hand with a shift in attitude also intensified by the pandemic. "We went from a hip-hop, pop mentality of *I'm in the club* to *I'm stuck at home*," Levy says. "In that setting, people respond to earnestness and personal connection." A lonelier, more isolated audience responded to musicians with acoustic instruments, singing their hearts out. Once your algorithms got the message, you could discover one such artist after another.

Sierra Ferrell, whose voice can evoke Édith Piaf, Billie Holiday and Amy Winehouse, at a performance in Kansas City, Mo., in May. Kristine Potter for The New York Times

Andrew McInnes, who manages the electronic dance music star Diplo as well as Americana artists like the Turnpike Troubadours and Sturgill Simpson, makes a case for a connection between the expansions of both E.D.M. and country. “The way music started being consumed in the streaming era favored prolific D.J.s and hip-hop,” he told me. “There was more access for making the music. That took a lot of young people out of the world of rock, guitar, being in a band.” Those who still wanted to make music with instruments concentrated more heavily in country and Americana.

McInnes sees the story of mainstream country and Americana as following a familiar pattern in the history of popular music. “It’s an equal and opposite reaction, like hair metal to grunge, disco to punk. An act like Florida Georgia Line mall-ified country, so then you get what they now call Americana — which to most is still country music, just not what gets played on commercial country radio.”

The overlapping genre and format labels — country, Americana, bluegrass — can get slippery, but the underlying cyclic exchange between the roots and pop ends of the musical spectrum creates an essential dynamic in American culture. Once upon a time, “Rabbit in a Log” or “You Are My Sunshine” was the hottest new sound out there; recent giant hits like Post Malone and Morgan Wallen’s “I Had Some Help” or Kendrick Lamar’s “Not Like Us” will eventually become half-forgotten curios, valued for their payload of history, that enterprising roots musicians can dig up and repurpose.

Sierra Ferrell, 36, a Nashville alt-diva and the old-timeyest of the risen-and-still-rising stars I heard in Telluride, puts together her own distinctive cutting-edge synthesis of antique styles like an expert vintage shopper. There was some Western swing in her evening set at the festival, some hot club jazz, some vaudeville, some Tin Pan Alley, a dose of that old New Orleans Spanish tinge. Each of those strains enjoyed in some long-ago era the status of being the newest-latest in pop music but then receded into history and became roots music. Ferrell’s eerie songbird voice and elaborately contrived personal style — at one performance she’ll look like a garland-strewn neoclassical statue come to life, at another like a renegade bus driver from a Busby Berkeley musical — combine with her mix of old songs and new songs that sound like old songs to imbue her with a throwback air.

Ferrell’s set had a dreamlike quality that seemed to make time warp and flow. In a white and blue wedding-cake dress, flowers twined in her hair and around the stand of the old-fashioned oversize mic in front of her, she seemed to pulse in place in her white boots like a character in a Betty Boop cartoon. Her voice, in which you might detect notes of Édith Piaf, Billie Holiday and Amy Winehouse, has a built-in gramophone tristesse that accentuates the arch sauciness and pluck in her songs. Life is tragic, she seems to say, so let’s dress up and sing sad songs and feel better.

The countriest of the cohort is Charley Crockett, a compact, reflective Texan with an instantly recognizable baritone voice who favors cowboy hats, boots and closefitting leather jackets. Widely hailed as the real thing by those who find Nashville’s mainstream product too processed, Crockett, 41, has cranked out albums at a heroic rate in recent years. He is billed as the coolest cat in country, but his performances show appealingly authentic flashes of strain — the atonal bark that creeps into his delivery when he leans on a note, the hint of earnest awkwardness when he puts a little extra body English on a line. A vocal critic of the corporate music industry, he sees himself as an inheritor of Hank Williams, the patron saint of honky-tonk street cred.

Crockett onstage in Nashville, Ind. He honed his songwriting and performance skills as an itinerant street musician, drawing on diverse styles to engage his listeners. Kristine Potter for The New York Times

In Crockett's telling of the story of country music, Hank Williams "learned everything on a street corner in Montgomery, Ala.," a reference to the young Williams's informal apprenticeship to Rufus Payne, known as Tee-Tot, a Black street musician. "And Hank took that training and he absolutely disrupted Nashville" when he arrived there in the 1940s. "I can't stress enough how outside of it he was. He was coming from the sensibility of somebody who found out on the street what worked. It's vaudeville, it's the medicine show, drinking songs, Tin Pan Alley tunes; it's blues, dancing songs, tried-and-true folk ballads, square dances, traditional old-time jazz."

Crockett became an itinerant street musician after getting into trouble with the law in his teens. He spent years drifting, sleeping where he could and playing for tips on corners, on the subway, wherever people congregated in Dallas, New Orleans, New York, Paris, Spain, Morocco. Telluride too. "I used to hobo around these ski towns big-time," he told me. "People were good to us. There's still some of that old laid-back '60s free-form culture in the high mountains."

Busking made Crockett a committed syncretist, mixing whatever works to engage listeners. A prolific songwriter, he draws deeply from Western swing, honky-tonk and other country styles but also from classic soul, R&B, standards. He can sound like Hank Williams one moment and the O'Jays the next, or even at the same time.

Like Ferrell, who also started out as an itinerant busker, Crockett offers a persona and songcraft with a strong retro quality that audiences respond to. Especially when he sings it, one important component of the appeal of roots music is the feeling that it conveys time-tested wisdom and experience, tunefully preserved in music-making traditions that reach back to the good old days that were also the bad old days.

When I asked Crockett how this quality also makes its way into the songs he writes, he said, "I think it's factory-installed." He gave the example of "Welcome to Hard Times" ("Welcome to hard times, and feelin' low/Do you like sinnin'? No? Well, you will before you go"), which became a pandemic-era breakthrough, accelerating his move from street corners to Jimmy Kimmel. He said: "I wrote it in 2019 in Mendocino County after I had open-heart surgery" — at 34, to correct a congenital condition — "and I found out my manager was a snake and the person I was dating, I wasn't the only one. I got that snake out of the grass; I got that girl out of my bed, or I got out of hers. I was basically living in my truck again, doing the same thing I'd been doing a decade before, relying on the kindness of old ganja farmers and biker dudes in bars, sleeping in barns."

"Sometimes we start a song and we're like, This is the fastest we've ever played it and we didn't even mean to do that," Molly Tuttle, the bluegrassiest member of the cohort of roots-music stars, told me. "Everyone has to kind of up their game, which adds this excitement. Your heart rate gets going faster, and it's like you're on a crazy ride. It's athletic, it's thrilling, it's fun." Though blur-fingered picking for its own sake can become an enemy of musicality, there's no denying that speed is the most spectacular feature of bluegrass. "Not every song is a barnburner," Tuttle went on, "and you don't want to be, like, hitting people over the head, or else their eyes are going to be glazing over, but I think when it's put in the right place, it is this cool unique feature to this music." A steely little smile played over her face as she added, "And it has this kind of aggressive nature to it."

The first woman to win the International Bluegrass Music Association's guitar player of the year award, Tuttle is famous for sustaining the originality, precision and unmatched tonal ripeness of her playing at even the most murderous tempos. Craig Ferguson, the Colorado-based festival organizer responsible for Telluride, had her foremost in mind when he observed that an emergent generation of female instrumental stars — also including the mandolinists Sierra Hull and A.J. Lee and the fiddlers Bronwyn Keith-Hynes and Brittany Haas — has revitalized the genre by breaking the bounds of convention that used to disproportionately confine women to singing roles.

"Bluegrass has become incredibly technically proficient," Matt Glaser told me. He directs the American Roots Music program at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, a leading conservatory for roots-music players. "All these kids are playing at an incredibly high technical level," he says. "It's never been this high." That doesn't mean that the music is necessarily better now, he emphasizes, but it does mean that "the greatest bluegrass players today can hang with the greatest musicians in any musical tradition, and they play with the greatest jazz musicians, classical musicians, Indian musicians."

Tuttle, 32, studied at Berklee, as did Hull and some significant minority of the players who took the stage in Telluride. Berklee and other college-level programs form the apex of a training system that begins in fiddle camps, where homegrown talents can start the process of leveling up in more advanced company. Even Billy Strings, no college man, absorbs music theory like secondhand smoke from Berklee-trained bandmates. “I’m always asking Alex Hargreaves” — who plays fiddle in his band — “some theory question,” he told me. “I was asking him yesterday, ‘What the hell is this sound?’ He says, ‘It’s Lydian dominant.’ I’m like, ‘Oh.’”

Molly Tuttle, the first woman to win the International Bluegrass Music Association's guitar player of the year award, preparing to take the stage in Louisville, Ky., in April. Kristine Potter for The New York Times

"Music always goes along a curve of getting more complicated," Rhiannon Giddens told me. "That's where classical music came from," she explained. "At one time, it was improvisational, open, and then it became slowly more complicated, more formal. Everything tends to go in that direction" — denser, faster, more demanding, more and more the preserve of highly trained virtuosi removed from the run of everyday pickers.

A comprehensively distinguished (Grammy, Pulitzer, MacArthur) banjo player, singer, composer and cultural critic, Giddens has strongly held ideas about what's clinging to the roots of roots music. She has played the Telluride Bluegrass Festival before, but she wasn't there this time, so I caught up with her on Zoom from her home in Ireland.

"Bluegrass is performance music," Giddens said. "You sit in your chair, and you listen. You didn't sit and listen to old-time music; it had a function within a community. We go from 'Let's sing a song together' to 'You sit in the dark and watch me shred in the light.'" That does describe to a T my experience in Telluride, though you could feel there a pervasive nostalgia for the older music-making order's most attractive elements: participation, generosity, community, folk wisdom.

"I can't really talk about any of this stuff without talking about how the function of music has changed in our society," Giddens said, "and that means talking about string bands." The string band was a dominant feature of America's musical landscape in the 19th century, when you needed one to throw a fancy-dress ball or a backyard hoedown. Like the minstrel show, of which it often constituted an important element, string-band music was a contradictory, messily vibrant reflection of all the creative encounters and vicious divisions that characterize American life.

Technological innovation, increased leisure and growing wealth fed the rise of the recorded-music industry in the 20th century, which helped shift Americans from actively participating in local music-making toward consuming a standardized mass product as paying customers. The industry sorted popular music into genres to facilitate selling it. String-band-descended music sorted into the Black bin got labeled race music, blues, rhythm and blues and so on. String-band-descended music sorted into the white bin got labeled hillbilly, country and western, eventually country, bluegrass and so on.

“I hate commercial genres because they’re just fake made-up [expletive],” Giddens said. “There’s story songs, there’s ballads, there’s dance music, there’s spiritual music and that’s it. The rest of it is ‘How do we fill this box so we can make some money and turn people against each other?’”

Music always has to change, she acknowledged, and there has always been a two-way traffic of influence between what folks play on the porch and the work of musical professionals. But as commercial genres have multiplied and mutated under market pressure, it has become ever harder for listeners and musicians to find their way back through layers of marketing and myth and forgetting to the meanings associated with a particular style that originally came from a particular community. “Even if you’re not aware of it,” Giddens said, when you sing a song in some style descended from long-ago folk practices, “you’re telling the story of somebody who was killed, the story of unfairness in hiring, or whatever.”

That’s where the hard-times buzz of roots music, the sense of art emerging from the difficult lives of everyday people embedded in communities, still comes from. Despite our growing distance from those lives, she said, “People may recognize some of that original context in the song that they hear on the radio.”

Our embrace of roots music may involve plenty of forgetting and selective remembering, but we haven’t gotten so far away from the sources of the music that we can’t yearn for connection to that receding world. Consider, in that light, the lasting popularity of the 2012 YouTube video that helped Billy Strings achieve his initial viral breakthrough. Exemplifying Keith Levy’s “field-recording vibes,” it was shot on a phone in a basement in Ionia, Mich., to which Billy Strings and some friends retreated to trip on mushrooms while a loud party went on upstairs. Somebody asks him to play that song he wrote, and sitting on a brown couch with an acoustic guitar, he rips into a fierce rendition of “Dust in a Baggie,” a methamphetamine update on a traditional jailhouse lament: “This life of sin, it’s got me in/Lord it’s got me back in prison once again/I used my only phone call to contact my daddy/I got 20 long years for some dust in a baggie.”

One key to the video’s spread is the presence in the background of a beatifically stoned-looking dude known as Barefoot Ben, who hugely enjoys the song, hitting from time to time on a cigarette with no apparent awareness that it’s not lit. Online comments likened him to a video-game character giving out side quests.

But the essence of the video’s appeal, besides the precociously assured force of Billy Strings’s singing and guitar playing, is the impression that he has been picked up sometime in 1926 and dropped into the 21st-century company of tweakers and heads. In a buttoned-up brown-and-white flannel shirt and dark pants, his blond hair severely parted, he looks as if he might be 14 years old (he was 19) and raised to call his elders ma’am and sir and to know how to get a rabbit out of a log. He seems to come from way back there somewhere — way back in the sticks, way back when people were more surely rooted in the physical world and knew and felt things we don’t routinely know and feel anymore.

But the young Billy Strings in the video is not just a mythic figure harking back to a time of brier snares and moonshine. He’s also a familiar contemporary from our time of meth busts and video-game side quests and the routine use of “contact” as a verb. Like us, he hears not just Bill Monroe but also Black Sabbath and the Grateful Dead and whatever was on the charts 20 years ago or last week as historical sources to draw on in fashioning his own continuously updated mix of vintage styles, his own personalized algorithmic feed of authentic roots music.

One contradiction of our current cultural moment is that while technology cuts us off from one another and our past and the physical world, making us ache to reconnect with what we’ve lost, it also helps spread music infused with that nostalgia. Without lifting a finger, you can ask Spotify, Alexa, ChatGPT or some other robot servant/overlord to assemble for you a blend of wise old songs that sound relevant again and cool new songs descended from those old songs. They all flow together on demand into a seamless tradition that provides both a connection to history and the frisson of the new. Cutting-edge old-timeyness may sound like a paradox, but it’s the spirit of the age.

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