

## COUNTRY ACTS

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ta), Rob Crosby (Arista), Carlene Carter (Reprise), Aaron Tippin (RCA) all made strong showings as freshman acts. Independent labels managed to get into the game this year. Step One Records has had a strong card to play with Clinton Gregory, charting one single after another; and Rounder Records has been so caught up in the groundswell of public acclaim for fiddler/vocalist Alison Krauss that the label broke its album-only routine to release singles and videos to support the young star.

• In the awards arena, Brooks, Vince Gill, Ricky Van Shelton, Kathy Mattea, Reba McEntire, the Judds and Alan Jackson were kept busy with jaunts to the winner's circle. Brooks won six top honors from the Academy Of Country Music: entertainer, male vocalist, album, single, song, and video of the year. McEntire took the top female vocalist award; and the Judds won for best vocal duo. These two act subsequently earned the same recognitions at the TNN/Music City News Awards show. Mattea pulled down two Grammys, one for best country female vocal and another for singing the top country song. Gill scored a Grammy for the best country male vocal performance. Shelton retained the entertainer and best male vocalist of the year titles for the second year at the TNN/Music City News festivities—where Gill won the single and instrumentalist of the year prizes and Brooks copped the video of the year trophy. Jackson picked up an ACM award as best new male vocalist and walked off with two TNN/MCN honors: Star Of Tomorrow and album of the year.

Jackson and Gill are up for six trophies each at the impending Country Music Assn. Awards show, and Brooks is nominated for five.

• This was a record-breaking year for Fan Fair. Registration for the popular festival closed two weeks before opening day, marking the first time in the event's history that one couldn't buy a last-minute ticket. At the cutoff, more than 24,000 tickets had been sold. Another measure of Fan Fair's popularity and perceived influence was that many minor-label or no-label acts who had regularly rented Fan Fair booths were denied

booth space this year to accommodate acts from the major labels.

• More people are tuning in to country music radio than ever before. By the late summer of 1991, the country format was running neck and neck with Top 40 in the bid for listeners. Radio execs who attended the New Faces Show at this year's Country Radio Seminar were treated to a parade of fresh talent that rivalled any in the event's 22-year history. The bill featured Shelby Lynne, Billy Dean, Chris LeDoux, Pirates Of The Mississippi, Aaron Tippin, Joe Diffie, Ray Kennedy, Michelle Wright, Kevin Welch, and Corbin/Hanner.

• Under new ownership and management, Country Music Television became even more of a major player in the development of new acts than it had been. Early in the year, it scrapped its old rural-flavored graphics and replaced them with hot, bright, animated promos that involved the acts themselves, all done to snare the more youthful viewer. The quality of country videos now rivals that of videos in any other format, thanks both to the willingness of record labels to assign bigger production budgets and to the influx of gifted producers into the country arena.

• It was a mixed picture for country touring in 1991. Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, Alan Jackson, George Strait, Reba McEntire, Clint Black, and the Judds did well in the hard-ticket venues. But many another act, particularly mid-level ones, faced a lean summer. One major talent agency reported the slimmest picking for its acts in years. Package tours and multi-act festivals generally did well, but there were a few disastrous exceptions. County, regional, and state fairs were big buyers of country talent; but since they exposed it to fans as part of the gate ticket price or at reduced rates, they were not entirely



Mary-Chapin Carpenter

reliable barometers of country's appeal. Observers blamed the recession and the glut of talent for the comparatively hard times. A bright spot of the summer for tours, though, was that the cost of gasoline remained low.

• Former record executive Paul Lovelace established Compact Disc Xpress, a company that offers a "one-stop" mail service to country radio stations consisting of CDs compiled from the labels' single releases.

• Industry leaders seem to have concluded that this was the year for country to increase its hold on the youth market by showing a more youthful face itself. Not only did CMT target youth with its graphics and programming (see above), "Hee Haw" underwent the most sweeping change in its history. It shed its hillbilly trappings to take on a "suburban" look—and replaced several veteran cast members with fresher and younger talent.

• Country was beset by two minor controversies in 1991: CMT and TNN's refusal to program Garth Brooks' music video, "The Thunder Rolls," and the feminist-inspired outcry against the Holly Dunn single, "Maybe I Mean Yes." The publicity over the Brooks video virtually ensured it would be shown on other outlets; and to be sure Country Music Assn. members would have a chance to see and vote for the video, Brooks' label, Capitol Nashville, mailed copies to the voters. Consequently, the video is up for a CMA award. Dunn denied she was stereotyping women and encouraging date rape in her song. But she ultimately asked radio stations to stop playing the song.

• Among the tragedies visited upon country music this year were the Feb. 24 death of trailblazing honky-tonker Webb Pierce, the March 16 plane crash that took the lives of eight members of Reba McEntire's troupe, and the Sept. 4 death of Grand Ole Opry star Dottie West. Killed in the plane crash were Kirk Cappello, Paula Kaye Evans, Terry Jackson, Michael Thomas, Joey Cigainero, Tony Saputo, Chris Austin, and Jim Hammon. Pierce, who died at the age of 69 of cancer, was an unsuccessful nominee in 1990 for the Country Music Hall Of Fame. West, best known as the co-writer of "Country Sunshine" and as Kenny Rogers' duet partner during the late '70s and early '80s, died in Nashville during an operation to repair severe injuries she had suffered six days earlier in a car accident. She was 58.

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