

This is Not Your Father's Country Music

I like country music.

Since God didn't smite me after that statement, I'll continue.

Years ago I used to joke that I hoped God would strike me dead if I ever started listening to country music, or wearing black socks with Bermuda shorts. I'm sticking with the latter, but I'm hoping He gives me a pass on the former.

I grew up associating country music with cowboys, pickup trucks and hound dogs. Hank Williams' twangy voice was like fingernails on a blackboard to me.

The closest thing I ever had to a redneck friend was a large-animal veterinarian who drove a pickup truck with a gun rack in it. He used the rack to carry a tool that looked like a huge pair of pliers that he used to castrate cattle.

One of my favorite jokes used to be "What has 300 legs and seven teeth? The front row at a Willie Nelson concert."

But things change. Almost against my will, I find myself listening to more country music these days. The way I see it, I didn't come to country music – it came to me.

Like many others my age who grew up in the sixties and seventies, I got left behind by the transition to what is now the most popular music genre - "alternative rock" - whatever that is. Hip-hop is #2, but I prefer music with some kind of melody. "Soft" rock and "classic" rock are more palatable, but I've grown tired of them.

As have many of you. There's not much new these days in old-style rock and roll. Most of the big-name rock acts touring today feature guys even older than me, which is definitely not the case in popular country. Many of

country's superstars are under age 40. In 2004, the tour of Kenny Chesney (age 37) drew over 1.2 million fans, more than any other performer in all genres.

Country music had record-breaking album sales last year. According to a March 2005 CRS/Edison study, 84% of us are listening to more country radio than we did a year ago, and 61% say they listen more because country music is better than it used to be. 25% of us listen only to country music.

It seems like a lot of the hard rockers are actually in country music these days. Almost every country group plays a rock set where they trade their pedal steel guitar for a piano and their fiddle for another guitar. You'd never guess that rock wasn't their native tongue.

Watch country music videos on CMT (cable) for a half-hour some day. You'll see several performers with shoulder-length hair (I mean the men), one with a mohawk, and another that sings rap country. There's something for everybody.

I have a car that gets five country music stations on satellite radio, and it's not unusual to hear rock crossover country (yes, it goes the other way as well). Creedence Clearwater Revival, John Mellencamp, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, the Allman Brothers and a lot of other so-called rock groups are getting airtime on these stations.

Even Sting has a country music video. Jimmy Buffet's latest CD is a series of duets with a half-dozen country stars that blends steel guitar and fiddles with steel drums (who'd have thunk it). It's a great CD.

There are a lot of good live acts out there as well, or should I say out here. Last month alone I saw Brooks and Dunn, Gary Allan, the Del McCoury Band (bluegrass) and Josh Gracin without having to travel more than two miles from my house.

I missed another great bluegrass band at the IMU last month – the Yonder Mountain String band. My first love is still jazz, but I've evolved to the

point of learning to play upright bass so I can sit in at local bluegrass jam sessions.

Bluegrass has made a transition similar to country – it's not the hillbilly music it used to be. People who think they dislike bluegrass should buy any CD by Alison Krauss and Union Station before deciding.

I used to be afraid that if I became a regular listener of country music I'd also have to develop an affinity for NASCAR racing. But then I read poll that said among listeners who claim to listen to country music "a lot", almost as many admit to being fans of figure skating (45%) as NASCAR racing (49%).

I doubt if I'll ever become a fan of either of those sports, but then again I also have some black socks that I'm beginning to think might look okay with the right pair of shorts.