

HOW DOES AMERICANA MUSICS HISTORICAL INFLUENCES INFORM AN  
UNDERSTANDING FOR CREATING AN AOTEAROA AMERICANA WORK TODAY?

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this essay is to understand what defines the Americana genre, familiarise myself with the historical, cultural and traditional links, and ascertain why there is a strong representation of predominantly white artists.

The aim is to form a greater comprehension of the genre which in turn, will inform the creation of an original body of work based on the codes and conventions, but not limited to, Americana. An enlightened appreciation of the many origins of Americana music will form part of the framework for my Pasifikana project, and I anticipate building on what I discover by adding my own influences in the hopes of creating something unique, authentic and artistically rewarding. My research will also include recent developments in Aotearoa over the last decade, identifying some of the genre's local artists, discerning my own place and connection, for my own stories told through a Pasifika/Aotearoa lens - Whakapapa (genealogy), with links to my spiritual, cultural and ancestral identity.

The methodology used to examine this question is a combination of qualitative research using books, essays, online articles and conducting audio analyses of music files, artists and presenting a small section of my own practical project. The artists I have looked at are Ennio Morricone, Rhiannon Giddens, Johnny Cash and Emmylou Harris.

The structure will include a look at the various definitions of the Americana genre, a brief breakdown of the subgenres, a discussion of diversity and inclusiveness using literature reviews, a concise look at Aotearoa Americana over the last decade, contextual analysis, methodology and conclusion.

“Country taught me how to sing, it put me on a path. But I was never going to be locked into a formula. I don’t want to be considered a current country artist.”– Emmylou Harris

## **What is Americana Music?**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the genre as “American music having roots in early folk and country music.” It also inducted the genre, Americana, officially in its book in 2011

The Americana Music Association's definition reads, “Americana is contemporary music that incorporates elements of various American roots music styles, including country, roots-rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B, and blues, resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw. While acoustic instruments are often present and vital, Americana also often uses a full electric band” Perhaps this is what Emmylou Harris was referring to, originally influenced by country but not confined by its codes and conventions.

Americana music is a genre of roots music that incorporates elements of folk, country tradition (Chilton, 2023), blues, and rock. It originated in the early twentieth century, rooted in traditional American music with modern influences. The term "Americana" was coined in the late 1990s to describe a new wave of American roots music. It gained mainstream attention with artists like Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle, and Ryan Adams blending folk, country, and rock. The genre has continued to evolve with new artists, influencing the music industry.

Overall, the article provides an overview of the history, development, and characteristics of

Americana music, highlighting its evolution and influence in the music industry. (Hope, 2023)

Jack 11.0 discusses the confusion and ambiguity surrounding the term "Americana" in the context of music in his article "Pet Peeve: the term 'Americana' music – what precisely does it mean?" He questions the understanding of the term and argues that it encompasses a wide array of musical styles and genres, serving as a marketing phrase for diverse roots music. The article debates whether "Americana" is a genre, sub-genre, marketing device, or a descriptor for styles like country rock, folk rock, and alt-country. It also provides insights into the origins and development of the Americana radio format, to showcase music that does not fit within mainstream country or rock genres. Furthermore, the author discusses related terms such as alternative country and No Depression music, emphasising the diverse influences and styles incorporated within the Americana umbrella. (Jack 11.0, 2011)

In the book 'Southern Music/American Music' The authors elaborate on the formation of Southern folk music, attributing it to the convergence of the British-Celtic and African cultural traditions. It emphasises that Southern music is not purely traditional, highlighting its adaptability and continuous evolution. The influence of British, African, Spanish, and other subcultures is discussed, including the complex and interconnected nature of Southern music. The intermingling of English, Irish, Scotch-Irish, Scottish, and Welsh settlers is noted, making it difficult for experts to differentiate among them or establish their precise origins. The article underscores the composite nature of Southern music, with Alan Lomax describing it as "more

British than anything one can find in Great Britain" due to its extensive cultural influences.

Overall, this highlights the dynamic, diverse, and fluid nature of Southern folk music, shaped by a multitude of cultural interactions and historical influences.(Malone, B. C. & Stricklin, D. p.19 -1979)

Therefore to summarise, Americana music in its most literal sense, is a synthesis of American roots music genres, including folk, country, blues, bluegrass, and rockabilly. Furthermore, singer/songwriters, R&B, and roots-rock can all be considered Americana genres as well; Americana music fills a dynamic, inclusive, and timeless ever-evolving niche and continues to develop. Overall, we can agree on the complex and evolving nature of the term "Americana" in the context of music, which presents various perspectives and raises questions about its specific meaning. In the music business, Americana music is still a relatively new genre. The phrase has been used to express a connection to one's American heritage or individuality for well over a century (Ryan, 2021). It has been present in literature and the arts for some time, but its association with music is new. Below is a list of subgenres of Americana and brief backgrounds of origin.

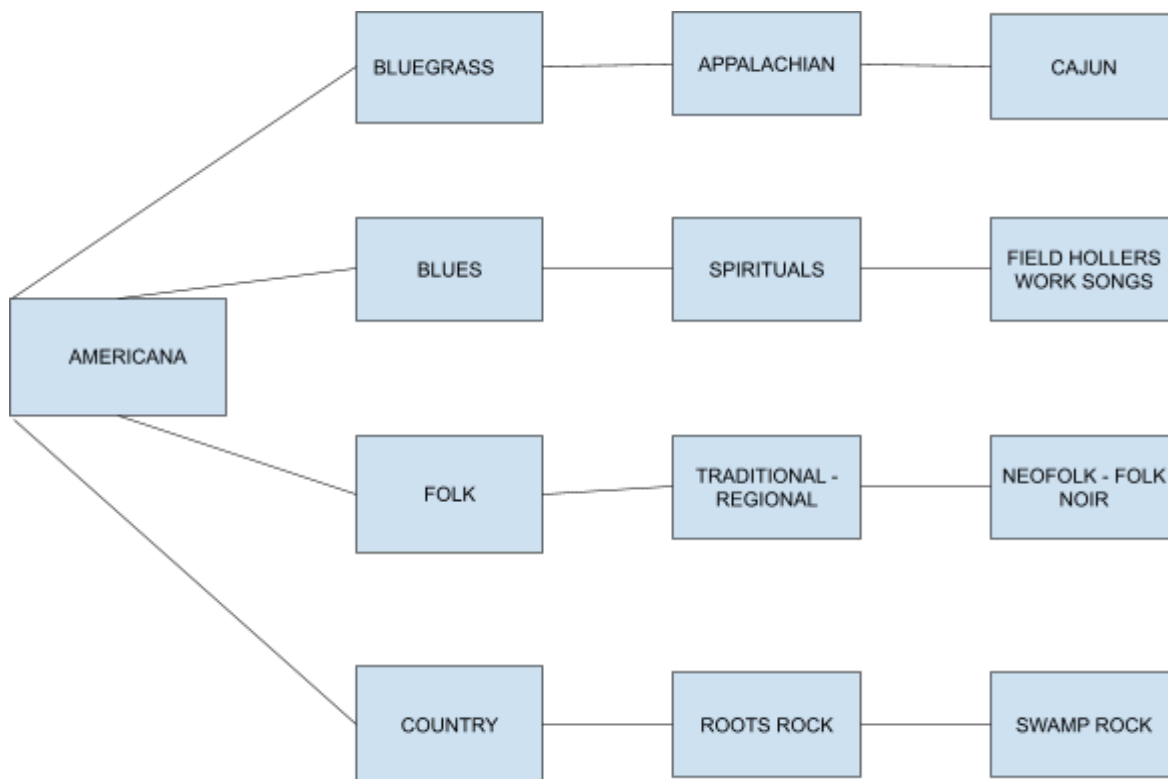
**Country** : The ballads, folk songs, and popular songs of the English, Scots, and Irish settlers of the Appalachians and other regions of the South are ultimately the source of country music.

**Bluegrass** : American southern string band music, blues, English, Irish, and Scottish traditions, as well as sacred and country music, are all combined to create what is known as bluegrass music. Its fast-paced, high-energy sound sets it apart.

**Blues** : The American Deep South is where the blues, as a musical genre and form, first

emerged in the 1860s. Spirituals, labour songs, field hollers, chants, shouts, and straightforward narrative ballads with rhymes from African-American culture were all incorporated into the blues.

**American Folk** : North American folk music originated in a variety of cultural contexts. Native American tribes' folk music traditions were infused with the folk customs brought to the Americas by European settlers and African slaves.



### **Americana - an official genre.**

The Americana Music Association (AMA) was formed in 1999 and held its inaugural conference in 2000. The association was then and continues to be led by Executive Director Jed Hilly since 2007. A move many consider to be the birth of the genre today as we know it. Jerry Shriver (writer for USA Today) contributed to the discussion of definitions when he reported the change.

“Separating contemporary folk and Americana resulted in the crafting of two carefully worked category definitions. Deciding factors will be the predominance of acoustic instruments, a key component of contemporary folk, and the presence of electrified instruments and “twang,” which are markers for Americana.” (Cutler, 2019).

According to Hilly, the AMA was founded as a result of the Country Music Association's (CMA) indirect endorsement of the creative choices made by country music radio in the 1990s. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 allowed media cross-ownership to support free-market competition, according to the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates radio. The true result, in Hilly's opinion, was the loss of a dynamic and competitive radio market, as ten companies took control of 10,000 radio stations instead of 10,000 radio stations, in other word a small minority wielded a massive majority of audience power and influence. The opportunities for original, genuine or authentic artists had vanished therefore and due to a dramatic drop in operators, there was less competition and opportunity for niche marketing. The country music radio playlists became repetitive and monotonous. (Brookfield, 2021)



The Americana Music Association (AMA) is thought to have come of age in 2009, when Hilly persuaded The Recording Academy to divide the Grammy award for Best Contemporary Folk/Americana Album into two categories: Best Folk Album and Best Americana Album. (Cutler, 2019) Now, at least in the eyes of the American music industry, Americana was officially a category but most importantly, a recognised genre of music.

### **Americana - Diversity and Inclusiveness?**

As we have seen so far Americana is a broad category and covers a huge range of traditional American music in a historical, contemporary and progressive context. The Americana Music Association was founded in response to some traditional country musicians who felt left out by the ever evolving commercial country music trends, according to Hilly. He believes that the genre's inclusiveness is essential to its identity and history. The last two decades have not only seen Americana distance itself from the commercialism of Country music but also its perceived lack of diversity.

But since the inception of the A.M.A. in the early 2000s what evidence is there of Hilly's claim as well as others? Is there a real change happening within Americana music compared to country over the last twenty or so odd years? What about in Aotearoa?

## **Americana (U.S.)**

ASCAP, BMI, SESAC, Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp, Tennessee Department of Tourism, and ASCAP all provide the Americana Music Association with a great deal of funding and support. Their goal is to represent American roots music's true voice internationally. The Association hosts a number of events all year long, such as the highly regarded Americana Honours & Awards programme and AMERICANAFEST. To preserve Americana music via education, the non-profit educational and philanthropic Americana Music Foundation (AMF) was established. The Foundation works to increase future creators' capacity and engagement, to shed light on inspiration, and to improve understanding, awareness, and enjoyment of cultural heritage. Through public events, musical performances, and educational programmes, the foundation carries out its purpose. Its year-round collaboration with The Americana Music Association and NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development is centred on preparing for the future to secure the generations that will follow in the community, while simultaneously preserving historical legacies and customs that highlight the heritage of Americana music. (Connor, 2024)

On the AMA website [americanamusic.org](http://americanamusic.org), under the banner 'All-Americana' it states, "All colours, all genders, all abilities, all sizes, all orientations, all identities - all Americana. Formed in 2020 as a reaction to concerns raised over the lack of diversity, with some communities not feeling fully 'embraced' by the Americana genre. The steps taken as a result include 'Broadening representation on our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, including, but not limited to, representatives from the trans and non-binary communities.' and 'Hosting diversity training for Americana Music Association staff, Board and Committee

members.’ The AMA cannot be faulted for taking its time and resources to make these changes as this is a clear example of listening to and valuing your music community's input and wellbeing.

American singer, songwriter, and producer Kasey Anderson suggests, “Americana and country music both trade heavily in nostalgia; they're just different kinds of nostalgia. Within the Americana genre, there is ostensibly less racism, bigotry and misogyny couched in talk of preserving ‘tradition.’” (quoted in Cholst, 2019).

Multi award winning African-American Americana artist Miko Marks says of Americana, as opposed to Country “It's more inclusive. It's more accepting of artists — not brands, but artists. It feels like what country music should be,” Marks says. “You're going to hear it all. You're going to see it all. And that's what I belong to, personally.” (The Boot, 2021)

George De Stefano, a writer and editor specialising in culture and politics for online magazine ‘popmatters.com’ wrote a book review titled ‘The Unmentionable Whiteness of ‘AmericanaLand’ which points out quite the opposite of these claims of diversity, as it critically examines John Milward's book "AmericanaLand: Where Country & Western Met Rock 'n' Roll" and discusses its shortcomings in addressing racial diversity and inclusivity within the Americana music genre. The paper argues that the book's focus on the intersection of country and rock 'n roll music, by neglecting the contributions of Black artists and other people of colour, results in an incomplete and biased portrayal of Americana. Drawing on examples from the book, the paper highlights the limited attention given to Black music and artists, as well as the underrepresentation of Latino musicians in the narrative. Additionally,

the paper critiques Milward's reliance on previously published material and lack of original research, which it argues contributes to a shallow and uninspiring account of Americana. Furthermore, the paper discusses the omission of key Black performers such as Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemons, as well as newer talents like Lilli Lewis, as missed opportunities for a more inclusive and comprehensive exploration of the genre. Ultimately, the paper concludes that "Americanaland" fails to engage with the critical issues of race, representation, and diversity within Americana music, thereby limiting its relevance and appeal to a knowledgeable and discerning audience. (Stefano, 2021).

“The Americana community needs to embrace more black musicians. That’s the one area where I feel it should really strive to be even more inclusive. I, for one, wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing if there wasn’t some black musician who had suffered in the South. That needs to be honoured and if amends need to be made, they need to be made”. Rosanne Cash (quoted in The Real Easy Ed, 2017)

Rhiannon Giddens comments,

“Just saying the banjo was African-American...you’d be flayed. Many people were holding on to cherished misbeliefs that the banjo was invented in the Appalachian Mountains by Irish people and that black people didn’t have anything to do with it.”

In an article published recently in the guardian.com, by none other than Rhiannon Giddens, (two-time grammy award winning Americana artist and music historian) she discourses briefly on how ‘Black artistry is woven into the fabric of country music. It belongs to everyone’ The article discusses the perception of country music as a genre exclusively belonging to white, rural Southerners, and challenges this notion by delving into the historical

origins of country music. It examines the roots of country music, tracing it back to enslaved people of the African diaspora who created instruments like the banjo in the 1600s. Giddens also highlights the influence of Black musicians on the development of folk music and its subsequent commercialisation through blackface minstrelsy in the 19th century.

Moreover, the article explores the impact of the recording industry in the 1920s on the categorisation and commodification of music. It argues that genre is a product of capitalism and is controlled and maintained by those in power to commoditise art. Giddens asserts that, prior to the 1920s, American musical styles were more fluid, with regional styles carrying more weight than racial distinctions. However, the emergence of the recording industry led to the segregation of music into categories based on race and genre.

Additionally, the piece emphasises the active participation and creative contribution of Black musicians, alongside their working-class white counterparts, in the co-creation of country music. It challenges the notion of country music as a pure ethnically white tradition and asserts that it is a result of collaboration and the convergence of diverse musical traditions. The paper concludes by advocating for the recognition of the Black co-creation of country music and emphasises that everyone should be allowed to enjoy and make country music with respect, understanding, and integrity, debunking the myth of a purely white tradition in the genre.

In summary, the article provides a comprehensive examination of the historical origins of country music, emphasising the significant role of Black musicians in its development and challenging the notion of it as an exclusively white tradition. It sheds light on the co-creation of country music by musicians of different backgrounds and advocates for a more inclusive

understanding of the genre's history. (Giddens, 2024)

...“I don’t care about fame or celebrity. I just want to talk about the banjo and American music, the voices that have been lost, this rich tapestry that we keep trying to thin out. That’s why I’m on this planet.” - Rhiannon Giddens

An interesting take on the subject, is written by (Trigger, 2018) titled, “Definition is Americana’s Greatest Challenge, Not Diversity” regarding the AMA awards performances in 2018. Since its inception in the early 2000s (Americana) there have always been questions surrounding the validity of AMA’s original intentions regarding diversity, especially in the context of the predominantly white and affluent audience. Jason Isbell (Americana Singer/songwriter), expresses his conflicted feelings about the lack of diversity in the list of award winners compared to the nominees. The problem is portrayed as a "white gaze" issue within the audience, rather than a lack of diversity on the stage. The term “white gaze” is used to describe the almost ‘exclusively’ white audience even though nearly half the performers on stage were African Americans. The article further discusses the challenges in diversifying the Americana audience, noting that efforts to integrate more African American and minority artists have not significantly changed the demographic makeup of the audience. The discussion also mentions the idea of integrating hip-hop into Americana and its potential impact on the genre. It raises concerns that the inclusion of hip-hop may lead to the edging out of artists who depend on Americana for support, ultimately adding confusion to the genre's identity. Additionally, the article touches upon the perception of Americana as the non-commercial side of country music and emphasises the genre's role in providing support to overlooked artists. It concludes by highlighting the ongoing debate about the definition of Americana and the importance of maintaining a balance between diversity among performers

and defining the genre's sonic palette. The article stresses that Americana should strive for diversity while also maintaining its integrity and not attempting to be all things to all people.

Finally Scott Baxendale challenges the perception of the Americana music genre as being predominantly white and male. He adamantly expresses disagreement with the notion that the genre lacks diversity and argues that the representation of women and people of colour in Americana music does not necessarily indicate bias or discrimination. The author, drawing from personal experience of attending numerous Americana and roots music events, emphasises that there are indeed more male and white performers in the genre, but questions whether this implies exclusion or simply reflects individual preferences and tastes.

Baxendale presents the argument that the imbalance in gender and racial representation within Americana music is not indicative of deliberate exclusion, but rather a reflection of the diverse preferences and self-identification of individuals with specific music styles. Drawing parallels with other genres such as hip-hop and pop music, the author emphasises that the underrepresentation of certain demographic groups in specific musical styles is not necessarily a result of societal bias, but rather a matter of personal choice and musical preferences.

Furthermore, Baxendale asserts that the bias lies not in the racial or gender composition of the genre, but rather in the musicianship. The author explains that Americana music draws from a variety of musical styles and traditions, reflecting the cultural diversity of the country. The article argues that the emphasis on diversity in Americana music should not be interpreted as a form of discrimination, but rather as an expression of individual and collective choices in the music industry. The author challenges the perception of Americana as a genre dominated

by white males and highlights the richness and inclusivity of the genre, drawing from personal experiences within the Americana music community.

Additionally, the article confronts the notion of racism or sexism within Americana music, portraying it as an unfair and inaccurate depiction of the genre and its community. The author argues against the labelling of individuals within the Americana music community as racist or sexist based on their musical preferences, highlighting that such generalisations undermine the instances of actual bias in society. The article concludes by defending the diversity and inclusivity of Americana music, viewing criticism of the genre as unfounded and as a reflection of the genre's thriving and growing influence. The author takes a personal stance against the critique of Americana music, expressing an unwavering belief in the genre's authenticity and rejecting the notion of bigotry within the community. (Baxendale, 2014)



## **Americana (Aotearoa)**

In Aotearoa (New Zealand) 2009-2010 around the same time Americana became officially recognised as a genre in the U.S., according to the online magazine 'North & South', A 29 year old Adam McGrath relocated to Lyttelton, leaving behind his job at a Christchurch high school to pursue a career in music. Settling as a caretaker at Phillipstown School, McGrath reconnected with local musician Delaney Davidson, leading to new opportunities. The unique appeal of Lyttelton lies in its history of drawing diverse individuals, offering a safe space at the British Hotel and attracting global sailors. The port town's ambiance evokes a feeling of being anywhere in the world. Additionally, the combination of affordable housing and striking surroundings has fostered a vibrant arts community. These factors have contributed to Lyttelton's transformation into a nurturing environment for artistic expression and creativity.

The article provides a detailed narrative of the evolution of the Americana folk music scene in Lyttelton, Aotearoa (New Zealand). It offers an in-depth look at the experiences of prominent musicians like Adam McGrath, Jess Shanks, and Delaney Davidson. McGrath's personal journey, starting from the United States and eventually returning to New Zealand, serves as a catalyst for the formation of The Eastern, a band that played a pivotal role in shaping the town's folk music scene. Described by McGrath as "a string band that roars like a punk band, that swings like a gospel band, that drinks like a country band, that works like a bar band, that hopes like folk singers, and sings love songs like union songs, and writes union songs like love songs, and wants to slow dance and stand on tables, all at the same time," had a reputation of being one of the hardest working bands, easily racking up over 200 gigs a year. Around this time, they had already toured extensively around New Zealand a few times and all over the world. (Van Kan, 2010)

Furthermore, the article delves into the town's unique geography, the influence of community figures such as Al Park and Davidson, and the collaborative atmosphere that contributed to the vibrant music culture of Lyttelton. The piece also underscores the significance of fostering emerging talent within the folk music landscape, featuring the experiences of artists like Marlon Williams and Aldous Harding as they became integral parts of the scene. 'The Eastern' became a cornerstone of Lyttelton's folk scene, operating as a kind of creche for talented musicians finding their feet. Past members and collaborators include established kiwi artists such as Marlon Williams, Hannah Harding (Aldous Harding), Reb Fountain, Anita Clark (Motte), and Adam Hattaway (Adam Hattaway and the Haunters)". Ultimately, the article offers insight into the impact of the Americana folk music that emerged in Lyttelton, emphasising its influence on the broader New Zealand music landscape. (Driver, 2023)

"It's often said Gore excels in country music due to its rural location, farming communities and a love of anything country. The District has certainly produced some of New Zealand's top country music stars over the years through its passion-driven" - Gore Country Music Club.

Staying within the South Island, Ruby Werry in her 2022 online article for critic.co.nz titled, *Why is Gore the Country Music Capital of New Zealand?* delves into understanding why Gore is considered the country music capital of New Zealand. It explains that the success of country music in New Zealand, particularly in Gore, mirrors the reasons for its success in America. The landscape and the predominant demographics of both areas, as well as the cultural influence of British, Irish, and Scottish emigrants, have facilitated the popularity of country music. The music's ability to resonate with themes such as social connections,

freedom, agency, family, and rural life has found a receptive audience in towns like Gore.

The article also highlights the annual Tussock Country Music Festival, including the MLT NZ Golden Guitars and NZ Country Music Awards, as a significant event reflecting the town's affinity for country music. The tight-knit, rural populations of Gore connect with the storytelling aspect of country music, reflecting themes relating to rural life, self-sufficiency, and conservatism. The article encourages readers to appreciate the diverse nature of country music and its resonance with anti-establishment and nature-loving ideals, highlighting its relevance and appeal across different audiences. (Werry, 2022)

So, with many advocates for Americana music within the industry in the U.S. claiming the genre to be more open, diverse and inclusive compared to country, it appears there is still much work to do; As for Americana artists in Aotearoa, there is no real evidence to suggest that the discrimination of certain minority groups within the genre exist or are a direct result of bias or prejudice. Yes, there is a definite lack of diversity by way of Maori or Pacific Island representation in Americana, which is still fairly unknown as a genre here, and the faces of 'Americana' for that matter are almost always of Palagi/Pakeha/European. Representations of both Americana and Country genres of music in Aotearoa are predominantly so and the artists primarily hail from the south island, though it may change in future. It could be argued that the former is gaining popularity throughout Aotearoa albeit slowly, but due to the global reach of streaming, social media, and other online sources, there is definitely potential to grow here. To have that opportunity and then be able to share our unique take on the genre with the place of its origin as well as other music markets overseas bodes well, for some exciting times in future for Pasifikana.

## Contextual Analysis

### Artist Influence - Ennio Morricone

Album - A Fistful of Dollars (1964)

#### ENNIO MORRICONE - A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS

Bold, spatial and dramatic

Combination of orchestral, acoustic and electric instruments

Electric guitar 'surf' reverb sound prominent

Reverb, tremolo, tube amp

Elements of surf rock, country, Americana

Italian filmmaker Sergio Leone's iconic picture *Per un pugno di dollari* (A Fistful of Dollars) from 1964 had a lasting impact on the western genre. This movie created a new kind of western that was brutal, sardonic, stylish, and bleak, with its stylised violence, desolate vistas, never-ending deserts, cunning villains, and an unnamed rogue hero. Ennio Morricone's gritty and varied music track complemented this new look. His distinctive use of tempo, tones, and orchestration established a style of cinema composing that would impact countless subsequent films. His orchestral arrangements included the use of whips (mimicking ricochets of bullets), flutes, bells, chants, voices and even whistling.

Extra Listening - Albums (For A Few Dollars More 1965) / (The Good, the Bad and the Ugly 1966)

**Links to Americana music and influences** - Coined in 1841, the term ‘Americana’ stood for the nostalgia and longing for “The Good Old Days,” where Americans lived in small towns and cities (quoted from PMH 2024). Morricone’s collection of musics (as above) and his production outcome evokes a sense of nostalgia, the landscape, isolation and demographics of the old time wild west, drawing on Americanas vastly rich history both musically and geographically - There is also a very strong personal attachment to Morricone's film music, one of the catalysts for taking on such a project as diverse but thoroughly enjoyable to produce as creating a work using the codes, conventions and characteristics of Americana music.

Growing up as a Samoan kid, fresh from Apia in the cool streets of Blockhouse Bay, Tamaki Makaurau in the 1970’s, I was exposed to the culture of the western world, in particular, America. My mother listened to and sung old time country music from older palagi males like Johnny Cash, Kenny Rogers, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson and pretty palagi ladies with long sometimes blond, sometimes brunette, straight or poofy hair like Dolly Parton, Loretta Lyn, Crystal Gale and Emmylou Harris. Dad introduced me to the cowboy western movies (like the above) which featured palagi antiheroes of the day, played by larger than life actors such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson.

Sarina Pearsons paper ‘Cowboy Contradictions: Westerns in the Postcolonial Pacific’ touches on the cultural significance of the cowboy in the Pacific, citing specific historical events in early twentieth-century Samoa and the embrace of cowboy iconography in Pacific literature and film. The resonance of the cowboy in Pacific communities, contradicting common narratives and emphasising the cowboy's popularity, particularly in Samoa and New Zealand especially around that time (Pearson, 2014) are testament to what I witnessed and experienced growing up, in one of the largest polynesian populated cities in the world. The truth is, I was always more interested in the sounds and scores that accompanied these movies and TV shows. Through

them, in my early teens I discovered other genres than just the country mum listened to or the progressive and contemporary rock that dad was listening to; Americana covers all of the above and more. I take into account the use of the acoustic guitar as lead instrument like traditional folk, the male voices, lines sung in unison and syncopated vocals, the manufacturing of space by using reverb, layering and mic placement as well as an emphasis on the different uses of texture/timbre in various parts of the recordings. Above all, the presence of acoustic instruments, which is a key component of contemporary folk, and the ‘presence of electrified instruments and twang,’ which are sure markers for Americana.

#### Artist Influence - Rhiannon Giddens

Album - Freedom Highway (2017)

#### **RHIANNON GIDDENS - FREEDOM HIGHWAY**

Lyrical rich

Traditional Americana acoustic instrumentation

Powerful, dynamic vocal performances

A combination of subtle and intimate production

Elements of bluegrass, gospel, folk, blues, country,  
Americana

Yes, it helps that she is perhaps one of the more well known Americana and roots artists of today, but it is also her contribution to the gaming scene that I am influenced most by.

October 2018 saw the release of Red Dead Redemption 2 on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One,

while November 2019 saw the release for Windows and Stadia. It shattered multiple records and had the second-biggest debut in entertainment history, grossing more than Red Dead Redemption's (Original game release eight years prior) lifetime sales in just two weeks and earning US\$725 million in sales during its first weekend. It also featured original music and scoring by Rhiannon Giddens (alongside Daniel Lanois). The game won the Game Award for Best Score / Music (Rhiannon performed at the awards ceremony) and has sold over 34 million copies. One of the tracks in particular became an instant favourite of mine because of its instrumentation, structure and production.

A complete opposite to Morricone's *Fistful of Dollars*, where the vastness and sonic space of the overall production sound is prominent, Giddens's 'Mountain Banjo' is intimate, understated but direct. Each strum, stroke or pluck is picked up, even the breathing sounds of the player can be heard with no gate applied so the sound is raw and earthy, overall the production is polished make no mistake but every natural sound left in, untouched. This is an approach I used on more than a few of my tracks for the project.

Extra Listening Albums (Red Dead Redemption II -Original Soundtrack 2019) (Tomorrow Is My Turn 2015)

## Artist Influence - Johnny Cash

Album - Americana IV: The Man Comes Around (2002)

### JOHNNY CASH - AMERICAN IV: THE MAN COMES AROUND

Lyrically rich, raw, honest, bold, rich with imagery

Traditional Americana acoustic instrumentation

Understated, dynamic vocal performances

Clean, polished and upfront production

Elements of folk, blues, country, Americana

Cash recorded "Hurt" in 2002 as part of his American Recordings series, which was influenced by Rick Rubin and featured Cash covering a variety of traditional and popular songs. Cash passed away in 2003 at the age of 71. Reznor was impressed by Cash's performance after hearing it, highlighting its "sincerity and meaning." Additionally, Reznor stated that the music "isn't mine anymore." The song's vulnerability in Cash's delivery was a major factor in the song's profound emotional resonance with the audience. Many people now rank Cash's music video for the song, which was directed by Mark Romanek, as one of the best ever (making number 2 of the top 100 music videos of all time - Rolling Stone Magazine 2021). When the video was shot in 2003, Cash was seventy-one years old and experiencing severe health issues. His time was running out, and the music video for his version makes no secret of his weakness. Within a few months, Cash passed away.

His wavering voice, the balance of the acoustic guitars panned left and right, building with the cello - accompanied by stabs of the piano (especially towards the end) gives the song an



honest, authentic, raw and emotional feel to the piece. One tends to forget that this is a cover of a song, as Cash's delivery is so thoughtful and sincere, his approach to this track is inspiration for some of my own pieces, using some similar production techniques, lyricism and delivery.

Extra Listening Albums (American III: Solitary Man 2000) (American IV: The Man Comes Around 2002)

### Artist Influence - Emmylou Harris

#### EMMYLOU HARRIS - ROSES IN THE SNOW

Upbeat, gentle and at times laidback

Traditional Americana acoustic instrumentation

Powerful, dynamic vocal performances, strong harmonies

Clean, spacious and roomy production

Elements of bluegrass, folk, blues, country, Americana

Album: Roses in the Snow (1980)

Recorded in 1979, Harris' cover of 'Wayfaring Stranger' drew me in due to her voice first and foremost. There is a very slight gravelly tone to her vocal track, again, one of the key signifiers of Americana music. The other element that pulled me in was the melody line consisting of a blues interval where the first two notes ( C ) are the same and the following two notes ( G ) , as the song continues you can hear the blues scale used throughout the rest of the song with variations of I-V at the start of each verse.

Furthermore, the instrumentation is acoustic, i.e. guitars, mandolin, lapsteel, double bass, violin and kick and brushes on a snare. The harmonies are brought in at the last chorus as it builds to the end, all in all a great example of Americana with all its many influences.

Extra Listening Albums (Trio 1987)

## Methodology Example

### The Bull (Taurus) - Steve Tofa

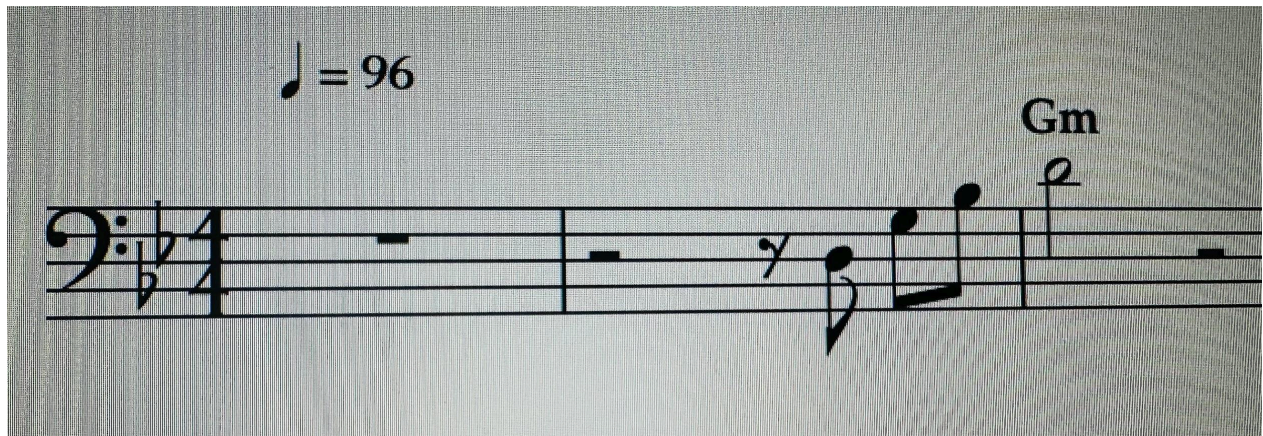
20/04/2023 - Key: G minor, 4/4 - 96 bpm

The first demo was recorded with a mobile phone.

No lyrics at the time but a rough melody was added on top of some guitar strumming.

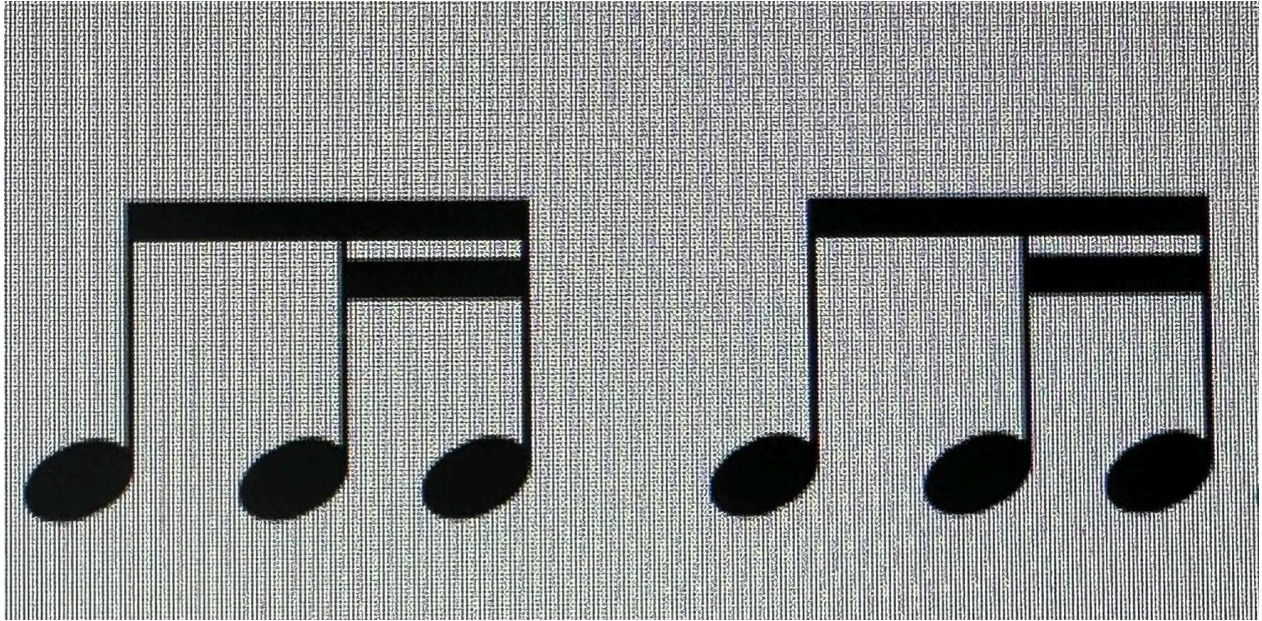
The opening melody idea consists of the tonic chord but starting on the fifth e.g. D, G, B  $\flat$ , D

or



The significance of the first three note values (or the grouping of the quaver rest followed by three quaver beats in the bar) becomes a major part of the song as the motif - which is first introduced by an electric guitar played over the 'galloping' rhythm of the acoustic, (Final recording) - and repeats itself throughout the verses. The idea behind this is to prepare the listener for an epic story being told as it builds towards the finale.

Key examples of the Americana genre present in the demo are the tempo 4/4 and a typical rhythm created when one mutes the strings to emulate the sound of a snare drum or a train on the tracks. This is where I incorporate ideas behind Johnny Cash's percussive strumming and Rhiannon Giddens use of the rhythm below in her track 'Mountain Banjo' (2019)



“This rhythm is often associated with a galloping horse, and can be found throughout all three of the Dollars trilogy films, as well as other tunes associated with the American West, including the Bonanza theme, Rosini’s William Tell Overture/Lone Ranger theme, Hang ’Em High, The Rifleman, and many others.” (Kausalik 2008)

### **Structure**

The demo's structure is rough but there is an idea for the opening melody, tempo and key.

E.g Intro the first 8 bars stay on I

Vs. - I, I, II, I x 2

Pre Ch. - III, III, II, back to Vs.

Then the whole cycle begins again, not really going anywhere but it is a start.

04/07/2023 - Mobile phone recording.

Key change from G minor to A minor: The reason for the change was to get a better vocal sound i.e a thicker timbre and a more ‘gravelly’ tone (one of the key signifiers of the Americana genre)



adding more authenticity and weight to the lyrics and narrative of the song.

First draft lyrics added, story of two men that find each other during wartime and prepare to go into battle for what may be their last one. Slight variation on strumming instead of rhythmic it is now more of a 'bluegrass country' strum where the bass notes are played alternatively with the thumb in between each strum.

01/08/2023 - Home studio recording.

Tempo remains unchanged since original demo @ 96 bpm

Key change number 3 from A minor to B minor but using a capo on the 3rd fret.

Guitar track 1 now has a permanent 'galloping' strum with a Maton steel string; accompanied by 8 tracks of backing vocals in the form of a small men's choir:

3 x bass on root note of key (Bm), 1 x on 3rd (D), 2 x on 5th (F#), 1 x 8ve of (Bm), 1 x 8ve of 3rd (D)

The choir is another nod to Morricone as well as a salute to Joseph Koo whose martial arts soundtrack to the 1972 Bruce Lee film 'Fist Of Fury' was also influenced by the spaghetti western scores of that time, including Morricone.

In the first pre-chorus a second acoustic guitar is added (nylon classical) to thicken the strum and add tension to the build up towards the first chorus. Both Nylon and steel strings guitars are panned either side to bring the desired thick effect.

Second chorus the melody is accompanied now by two harmonies to build towards the instrumental break right before the bridge.

In the bridge, a solid brush drums set is introduced, orchestral strings and powerful harmonies to lift the song and build towards the 3rd and last chorus, as well as the finale.

14/01/2024 - Final Home Studio Recording and Mix.

I decided to add a kick and snare drum as a marching outro, to give a sense of battle and war but hopefully in a respectful and reflective manner.

Plug in Reverb (Chromaverb) as well as homemade reverb (as in below pic) added.

Mic top right and mic 2 bottom left.



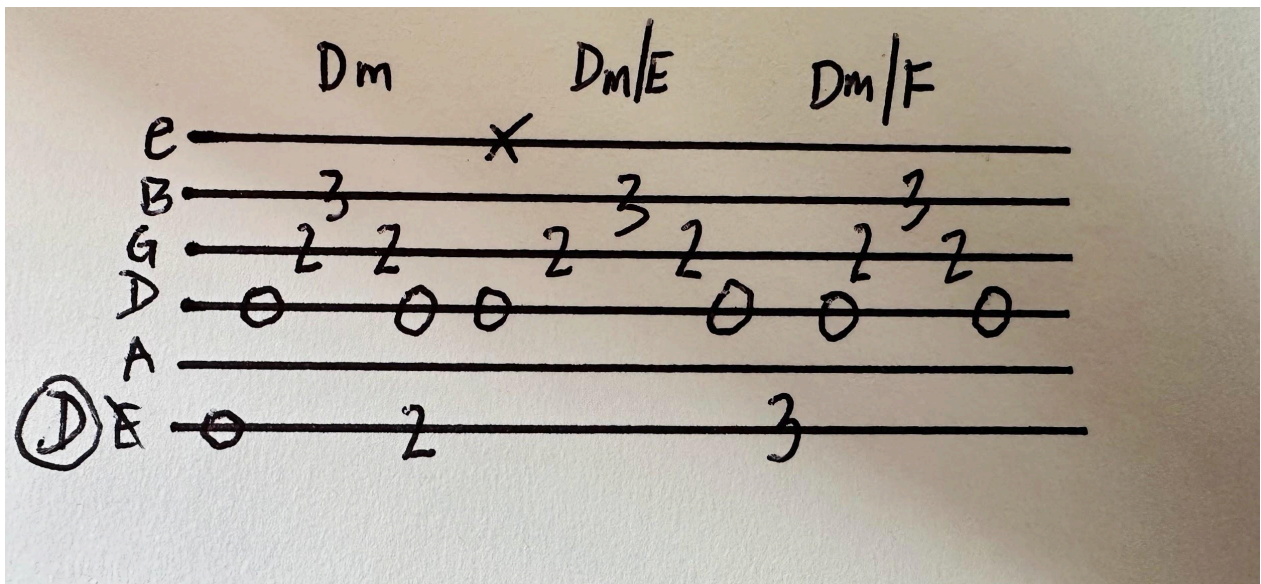
## The Wolf (Capricorn) - Steve Tofa

31/03/2023 - Key: D minor, 6/8 - 75 bpm

Drop D tuning. D A D G B E - Mobile phone recording.

1st draft - melody mumbled but pitched melody line ideas.

Opening chord progression D minor, D minor with E bass, D minor with F bass (e.g. in guitar tab below)



In the first draft I repeat this progression six times, two as the intro and four as the first verse.

After which I went to the VI which is B  $\flat$  major and then to the major VII with a D $\sharp$  as in the D minor melodic scale, this was to create tension initially but after a few serious listens, I made some major changes of which I will allude to in the next draft.

With the drop D tuning I was able to use a lower register in my vocal line, giving me a thick gravelly tone to compliment the ringing open D tuning, giving me Johnny Cash vibes so to speak.

NB. I had also finalised my harmonies not long after completing the first draft.

04/07/2023

Recorded using Logic Pro.

Chord progression changes added with complete verse, chorus and breakdown chords and

structure. Emphasis on picking, djembe added for bass drum and percussion including the use of the higher parts of my 12 string guitar to emulate the sound of Mandolin (production technique used to highlight this as well)

Finale of the song ends on an a cappella with voices only.

15/01/2024

Completed - More percussion was added.

Bass track included - making for a very full production.

Suggests a strong influence of Americana and folk elements.

Vocals, harmonies, shaker, tambourine, drop D bass has really thickened up the sound over all.

To be mixed and Mastered.



## Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to acknowledge the historical, cultural and traditional aspects of Americana music. The old saying ‘You can’t really know where you are going until you know where you have been’ by Maya Angelou rings true. I had already started my project and was well into finishing a few of the songs before I really took the time to understand exactly what the Americana genre entailed. This was partly because creatively, if ideas begin to flow I ‘run’ with it while the ‘fountain is overflowing’ also I originally started with two other genres in the beginning, Ambience (Which I had already been familiar with) and Folk Noir, the latter which proved to have next to no real information on to allow for valid research.

Finding the connections with folk, bluegrass, country et al perked my interest even more as well as the discovery of the origins of certain instruments that were stigmatised with white American Country music history but were in fact, from African origins e.g The Banjo.

Is there work to be done for Americana to be more inclusive and diverse in the U.S?

With all the differing opinions I believe there really is a common ground; Like Jed Hilly, Kasey Anderson and Miko Marks posit, Americana does appear to be more inclusive and accepting at least more so than its’ commercial cousin - but that has only recently just started to come to the fore. As for Stefano and Giddens, yes I agree there is still plenty of room to move and improve but as Trigger and Baxendale pointed out, the interest has to be there. There has to be an interest from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities to balance out the growing number of Americana BIPOC artists. The U.S has a long and varied history regarding the genre whereas in Aotearoa, we are only beginning to develop our own take on it.

Perhaps I could apply Trigger and Baxendale's approach here also, especially as historically we don't have that link to our own ‘Americana’ type history. Using their argument, if we were to call out the face of Aotearoa Americana as too white, what then of the makeup of artists and audience

alike for say, Hip-Hop in Aotearoa? Could we say it's too 'Brown' and there are not enough palagi faces in the mix? The only answer I have is that it is a reflection of the diverse preferences and self-identification of individuals with specific music styles. In other words no one is stopping anyone from involvement within the genre here in Aotearoa, there are no 'gatekeepers'.

As for my contextual analysis, again the more I understood about the genre's past connections the more I was able to incorporate the many styles and variations into my own work. As I have gone on in the production phase and nearing completion I can say I have developed a deep respect for Americana music, the traditions, history and artists both past and present and I am especially relieved to have chosen to complete my project using this genre as my Key influence. May it continue to develop and grow here in Aotearoa, Americana, Pasifikana.

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