REVIEW ARTICLE

Cocaine & Rhinestones, Season 2 as Public Humanities

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Tyler Mahan Coe, the creator-writer-producer of the hit podcast *Cocaine & Rhinestones: The History of Country Music*, freely discloses throughout his episodes, in interviews and on social media that he never finished high school, let alone set foot in the hallowed halls of academia. Indeed, Coe's life reads more like a hardscrabble, DIY, autodidactic quest for individualized learning and authority in a specific domain than one that adheres to the ideal of a traditional, universally oriented western education. If his formal studies were cut short, it is because Coe – whose surname is already suggestive of his country music pedigree – is, in fact, the son of outlaw country legend David Allan Coe, who invited a teenaged Tyler to join him on tour as a guitarist, plunging him headlong – sink or swim – into the milieu of Nashville musicians. In the ensuing years, Coe became one with Music City and has proved that the end of his secondary education was not the end of his intellectual formation.

To open every episode of *Cocaine & Rhinestones*, Coe articulates the same tagline: "I've heard these stories my whole life; as far as I can tell, here's the truth about this one." All the same, hidden beneath the as-far-as-I-can tell disclaimer is a thoughtful deep dive into books, newspapers, magazines, journals, records, archives and various Nashville miscellanea that certainly earns Coe his *bona fides* and establishes the podcast's author as authority (in the true etymological sense of both terms, from the Latin *auctoritas*, denoting clout, influence and authenticity). Still, its wantonly provocative title and explanation as "the podcast about 20th-century country music and the lives of those who gave it to us" might cause one to wonder what interest such a podcast might have to readers of *Lingua Romana: A Journal of French, Italian and Romanian Culture*. As I aim to reveal here, the intersections between the current season of the episodic series and our e-journal carry far more humanistic implications – from a culturally specific and universal perspective – than may initially meet the eye.

Indeed, in *Lingua Romana*, vol. 13, issue 1 (Fall 2017), we launched our inaugural issue featuring an annual rubric dedicated to Outreach/Public Humanities. At that time, I expressed the *raison d'être* of this section of the journal as being an attempt "to topple the traditional notion of humanistic studies as existing exclusively within the ivory towers of academia and highlight instead the living humanities on a wider plane of experience" (114). So, not only does the Fall 2017 date of creation of *Cocaine & Rhinestones* align perfectly with our express focus on the Public Humanities, Coe himself stands very much as the embodiment of the values we espouse, to provide a platform for voices that "will strengthen our multicultural community relations and facilitate opportunities for dialogue, to create a mutually beneficial intellectual future" (Ilona Klein, *LR* 13.1, 117). A PhD is not a prerequisite for entry into humanistic discourse. (And, lest anyone still doubt his scholarly acumen, consider this: When John Prine was hospitalized and dying of Covid, Coe aptly and adroitly labelled the master songwriter, in a 31 March 2021 tweet, as "Rabelais bleeding divinity"!)

What's more, in Coe's efforts to contextualize each episode, the recently finished Season 2 of *Cocaine & Rhinestones* draws on cultural touchstones that will be of undeniable interest to our readership – to wit: Spanish bullfighting, royal intrigue in Reformation France, early modern ice harvesting practices, Bartolomeo Cristofori's innovation of the modern piano, medieval romantic chivalry, Tudor sumptuary laws, the evolution of jousting, etc. In offering juicy, substantive lead-ins to each episode, Coe builds on his format developed over the podcast's 14-episode first season and demonstrates both the anecdotal and investigative genius of his enterprise. His episodes on pedal steel guitar virtuoso Ralph Mooney, the blood harmony of the Louvin Brothers, family dysfunction among The Judds, the creative synergy that made the hit song "Harper Valley PTA" or the Bakersfield Sound, and deconstructions of popular notions surrounding Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee," Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billie Joe" or Loretta Lynn's "The Pill" *all* converge to create a crossroads adjoining well-circulated received ideas and common lore with court records, viable firsthand accounts, recorded interviews, etc.

Even if Season 1 of *Cocaine & Rhinestones* shrewdly opened each episode with an explanation of pertinent cultural phenomena like the Streisand Effect, celebrity hall passes, Comstock Laws, Hoover's mendacious appropriation of Henri IV of France's "chicken in a pot" and the MacGuffin literary device – and each was accompanied by a rich library and reading/viewing/listening list, Season 2 is decidedly more intricately crafted, refined and polished. Over three full years separate the release of Season 1, Episode 14, "Ralph Mooney: The Sound of Country Music" (23 January 2018), and Season 2, Episode 1, "Starday Records: The Anti-Nashville Sound" (20 April 2021). Still, even bearing in mind that the latter half of this span saw the world in full pandemic mode, the careful listener will have no lingering doubts as to why so much time was required to create this 18-episode masterpiece (that reviewer Goeff Edgers has called the *War and Peace* of country podcasts). Whereas Season 1 displayed its erudition with a bibliography of dozens of volumes, its more recent counterpart narrows that list to a handful of essential texts. Of course, this could be due in part to the fact that all 18 episodes of Season 2 tell some part of the story of George Jones, the artist Coe continually upholds as simply the greatest country music singer to ever live; but, this narrowing of focus also stands as a testament to Coe's continually increasing scholarly sophistication.

For all the ostensible unity of direction – Episodes 1 through 3 are a "preface" talking about the music industry, music labels, music theory, the mythical Protean idea of a "Nashville Sound" or a "Nashville A-Team," and the history of *pinball* (more on that); Episodes 4 through 17, representing the core of the Jones narrative, include illustrative vignette interludes on Pappy Daily, Dallas Frazier and Billy Sherill, as well as the multi-episode back story and post-Jones afterword on the singer's most long-term and famous duet partner/wife Tammy Wynette; and, the final installment, Episode 18, is a non-linear flashback to the childhood of George Glenn Jones and his origins in music – the lead-ins for Season 2, at first blush, could not appear to be more random or incoherent. Yet, it is here that Coe takes the season beyond niche and intricately weaves the history of 20th-century country music into the fabric of western civilization.

Regularly repeated complaints on the "20th Century Country Music" public group page on Facebook, also managed by Coe, reveal that many chagrined listeners fail to grasp what Coe is building to here: "What does bullfighting have to do with George Jones?" "Why did I waste an hour listening to the story of Martin Luther?" "Did some programmer confuse podcasts?" "My grandaddy ran moonshine – but George Jones never did, so why talk about it?" "Who cares what

Freud had to say about cocaine?" "Ok, ice cream, gay nightclubs, drag queens… what?!?" – these are but a representative amalgamation of the reactionary responses to almost every episode. Nevertheless, Coe does not flinch. In what he terms the "Liner Notes" at the end of each, he often explains that his episodes are intended to build one on the next. And, in his sign off to the season finale, Coe finally addresses his vexed listeners directly:

> (W)hen the first episode of Season 2 came out, there were a lot of people who couldn't possibly know I was going to talk about pinball in this final episode (or why) and they felt the need to explain to me that pinball is irrelevant to the George Jones story. I'd imagine most of the folks who said something like that checked out somewhere around bullfighting and are not here anymore but, just in case anyone needs to have it pointed out to them, you have the technology at your fingertips to skip any part of these stories you feel are a waste of your time. Nobody who doesn't want to is under any obligation to read my words about pinball. However, I am obligated to push the limits of my writing abilities in order to resurrect the world that made these artists who they were. […] Season 2 has been constructed to only become better each time through. (Ep. 18)

As I suggested earlier, these cultural intersections are the entry points where *Lingua Romana* readers might find the hidden gems that may pique their interest and ultimately illuminate the entire matador's *traje de luzes*, or George Jones' resplendent Nudie suit.

In a determined effort not to offer spoilers or reveal any of Coe's carefully crafted surprises, I will still hit on a select few of the *Lingua Romana*-adjacent highlights of the season: Of undeniable import to Francophiles and Italophiles alike, Catherine de' Medici appears at various times across this season, as Coe revisits her mythical status as the individual responsible for importing gastronomy (and ice cream) to France and loosely equates the traumas of her childhood and marital relationships to those experienced by Wynette. The intrigues of the Valois-Habsburg Italian Wars – and their place in Reformist and Machiavellian thought – are explored in surprising detail (in fact, the first 20 minutes of Episodes 10 and 11, respectively, stand extraordinarily well by themselves as a sustained historical exploration into the dogma of plenary indulgences and the repercussions of the death of Pope Leo X for all of Western Europe, but especially for France, Spain and the Italian States). Bullfighting – from the presence of the powerful beast in paleolithic Lascaux cave paintings to its status under Felipe V of Spain, to Goya, Hemingway and Bugs Bunny – serves as a pretext for the development of American rodeo and western wear, in the same way that the death of Henri II of France would lead to the creation of carousels, tournament traditions and rural fair culture. Finally, Coe's exposition on chivalric romance set up in Episode 8 and completed in Episode 18 includes a discussion of Roman *sub rosa* pacts, the *Romance of the Rose*, the evolution of the Catholic rosary, Shakespeare, William Blake, the Grimm Brothers and Umberto Eco in its discussions of rose symbolism – and is simply not to be missed.

Akin to his approach in Season 1, in this season Coe continues to breakdown common misconceptions related to iconic songs – for example, Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" and what he calls Jones' "Divorce/Death Trilogy" of "He Stopped Loving Her Today," "The Grand Tour" and "A Good Year for the Roses." Examining song lyrics closely in these deconstructions and situating them within historical and lyrical context is a fine example of the close reading many of us teach in our university classrooms. Likewise, Coe also toes the fine line of refusing to shy away from the scandalous (i.e., Jones' front pocket set-up of a baggie of cocaine and a straw that even

shocked Waylon Jennings) while also shunning sensationalizing tall tales. For instance, the same 20th-century Facebook group mentioned above lamented Coe's refusal to retell the infamous story of an intoxicated Jones riding a lawnmower blades-down on the highway to get to a liquor store because his understandably worried spouse had locked away all of his car keys – and this despite the fact that Coe had painstakingly spent the previous several episodes revealing Jones to be a severely mentally ill man. From being abused as a child to chronic stage fright to alcoholism, avoidance behaviors and his physical and psychological abuse of friends and spouses, to the harrowing account of a devastated Jones consciously dissociating onstage into the personalities of the disapproving "Old Man" and Donald Duck-voiced jester "Deedoodle" (Ep. 15), Coe offers us steadyhanded glimpses into Jones' troubled inner world that recall his treatments of the violent predator Spade Cooley and the childhood traumas of Ira and Charlie Louvin from Season 1.

What Coe gives us in Season 2 is a more human, more fleshed out, warts-and-all biographical image of a singular figure of 20th-century Americana. Brought to life across the sound waves through Coe's confident, informed and authoritative voice, George Jones comes to represent the consumerism and commodification that dominated much of the 20th century. George Jones becomes a relatable symbol of love, betrayal, pain, trauma, displacement, triumph and redemption. George Jones taps into western institutions of fame, glamor, fortune and the downfall of such. In *Cocaine & Rhinestones*, George Jones helps us better understand ourselves and our own humanity.

Since *Lingua Romana* remains foremost an academic journal, I would be remiss not to point out that a handful of minor factual errors are found peppered here and there throughout the podcast. For one example, in Episode 11, Coe cites François I as never fully overcoming the tuberculosis he had contracted in Spain and dying after drinking a chilled beverage served to him by a servant. In all actuality, this was the fate of his eldest son and heir to the throne, also named François, who had replaced his father in prison in Madrid for two years as part of the treaty negotiating the king's release. François I would not die until 1547 (of sepsis following an acute kidney infection), whereas the *dauphin* died in 1536. All the same, Henri II, who was imprisoned alongside his older brother in Spain, would indeed be crowned the next king and the account of the torture of the Italian courtier Montecucculi who served the iced drink is all accurate. In other words, while a decade off on the death date, and having conflated two generations of Françoises, it would likely take an expert on Renaissance France like myself to notice that detail and it really does little to detract from his overall points on succession, father-son relationships and the technologies of ice and chilling drinks. Again, Coe's is a one-man operation, and he does not benefit from the boon of peer review to help catch such minor factual discrepancies. As such, these are easily missed, overlooked or simply forgiven.

While Bill Malone's monolithic *Country Music USA* remains the finest academic resource to account for the history of country music writ large, and anecdotal tales and (auto)biographies of individual lives and movements are more or less helpful in offering glimpses into the multifaceted world of country music, not one work is as effective at delivering this history within the meaningful, far-reaching humanistic context as is *Cocaine & Rhinestones*. For those who still hesitate to adopt the podcast technology, Coe publishes the transcriptions of each episode alongside photos, video clips and a bibliography as part of the show's accompanying blog at cocaineandrhinestones.com. Considering that it is a work available to all and is one that meaningfully helps further the human conversation, how could *Cocaine & Rhinestones* possibly not be considered as part of the public humanities?