

Country-music doc gets Davis screening

By Monica Stark, Special to The Enterprise Mar 3, 2025 Updated Mar 5, 2025 0



Glenda and Jesse Drew, both UC Davis professors, released *Open Country*, a documentary reclaiming country music as a "creative musical expression of working people of all colors. Through archival clips, contemporary interviews, performances, and animated graphics, *Open Country* repositions country music into its rightful place as a people's music." Photo by Monica Stark

After a transcontinental trip, the music documentary “Open Country,” created by UC Davis professors Jesse and Glenda Drew, is set to return for a special screening on Friday, March 7, at Sudwerk’s Beer Hall.

The event will benefit the Davis Live Music Collective, with doors opening at 6:30 p.m. Attendees can enjoy live music from Red Dog Ash, a bluegrass band described by Country Chart as "surprisingly fresh and exciting." Tickets are priced at \$13 in advance and \$15 at the door, and the evening will include a Q&A session with the Drews.

Over the past year, “Open Country” and its filmmakers have traveled to beer halls, community centers, avant-garde art spaces, and movie theatres, across the United States, England, and Spain.

All of their screenings have helped raise money for community projects, music programs, pubic radio stations and other worthy causes. In addition, every screening opens with songs from local musicians, to highlight local talent and remind audiences that country music is a dynamic and very-much-alive musical form.

Some of the places the film has shown are St. Louis, for victims of Hurricane Helene; The Rooftop Cinema in Valencia, Spain; Bristol, England’s Radical Film Festival; The Nevada Theatre in Nevada City, benefitting KVMR; Southern Illinois University in Carbondale ; The Jalopy Theater & School of Music in Brooklyn ; Radical Film Network's Archives of Radical Cinema in Madrid; The Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture; The Belk Auditorium/Wren Student Union in Mars Hill, N.C.; St. Stephens Music Hall in Huntsville, Ala., supporting The Valley Labor Report; Cafe Colonial in Sacramento, raising funds for a memorial plaque for Aunt Molly Jackson; The Pageant Theater in Chico, collaborating with KZFR 90.1 FM Community Radio; The Roxie Theater benefitting the Black Banjo Reclamation Project; and The Pearl in Locke.

“We’ve had some incredible experiences traveling with this film, and seeing the positive reaction to the film's message, which is that we need to take back country music and reclaim it as the voice of the multi-racial working class,” said Jesse. “We met many amazing musicians across the country and there is a strong current among young country fans that country music is not the stereotype that is often portrayed by Nashville and the music industry.”

The filmmakers delve into the origins of several fundamental instruments that have shaped country music, revealing surprising sources. For instance, they highlight that the classic Nashville steel guitar originated as a Hawaiian guitar, the banjo has its roots in Africa, and cowboy yodeling was popularized by Swiss musicians who traveled through the South with “medicine” shows..

“Open Country” further explores the genre's evolution in the 1950s, arguing that McCarthyism played a significant role in distinguishing Country-Western music from folk, which was often associated with left-wing artists like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Jesse explains that the term “country music” only emerged in the late 1940s to early 1950s, with the genre previously referred to as hillbilly or old-time music. Under McCarthyism, authorities sought to separate more political singers, like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, from those who focused on apolitical or patriotic themes, ultimately coining the term “country music.”

Notably, Jesse points out that Hank Williams, considered the “father of country music,” identified himself as a folk musician.

Jesse points out that the new Bob Dylan biopic “A Complete Unknown” begins with a conversation about this exact subject, asking what’s the difference between folk music and country music. According to Jesse, there is no difference.

Glenda and Jesse also point out that the film rightfully places the music of Black country musicians at the heart of country music, and point out that the recent Beyoncé contribution to country music is not an exception but part of a long tradition of African American contributions to the musical legacy of country.



Tags: Country Music, Music, Movie Theater, Pete Seeger, Old-time Music, Woody Guthrie, Performing Arts, Entertainment, Musicology, English-language Music, Folk Music, Arts, A Complete Unknown, Popular Music, American Styles Of Music, A2, 030225

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