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Corn Pone, Rebooted: Country's New Humor

NASHVILLE — “The Bobby Bones Show” is the biggest thing in country radio, on nearly 100 stations five mornings a week, and its ringleader, Mr. Bones, 36, likes to take credit for hastening the breakthroughs of a number of acts. Lately, he’s been shining a light on a trend that he helped cultivate — a resurgence of humor in country music, which has made modest hits of albums that let mainstream and alternative country fans feel as if they’re in on the joke.



For one week in February, “Redneck ____” by Wheeler Walker Jr., a provocative creation of the comedian Ben Hoffman, was both the No. 1 comedy album and the No. 9 country album. Granger Smith’s “Remington” arrived a month later, featuring jokey numbers by his outsized alter ego, Earl Dibbles Jr. And Mr. Bones’s own band, the Raging Idiots, a jocular duo that also features his show producer Eddie Garcia, recently released its first full-length album, “The Critics Give It Five Stars,” which not only made its debut atop Billboard’s comedy albums chart but landed at No. 4 on the country chart.

Country music has never been devoid of comedy: The Grand Ole Opry once featured the winking, rustic humor of Minnie Pearl, Grandpa Jones and Stringbean; the Statler Brothers cultivated the rube alter egos Lester Roadhog Moran & the Cadillac Cowboys; and Alan Jackson cast the comic Jeff Foxworthy in a music video. But at least from an outside perspective, the flirtatious party jams dominating the format in recent years seemed to repel humor. Now country is generating new, knowing ways of poking fun at itself in song.

Mike Dungan, the chairman and chief executive of Universal Music Group Nashville, noted that every country songwriting era has had wits like Roger Miller and Tom T. Hall. Brad Paisley has parlayed his drollness into a long-running gig as a host of the Country Music Association Awards and a new one as M.C. for the Wild West Comedy Festival in Nashville. “I think it’s always been there,” Mr.

Dungan said. “However, I do believe that in tough times, people want to feel better. I think these types of songs are a really great Band-Aid to what’s going on in your life.”

Mr. Smith, 36, enlarged his audience by capitalizing on the contrast between Granger Smith, a country centrist with a temperate, conversational vocal style, and Earl Dibbles Jr., who packs his bottom lip with tobacco and spins vigorous, nonsensical yarns. The Dibbles persona struck viral gold with a string of YouTube videos.

In gentle selections like “Tractor” and “Tailgate Town,” Mr. Smith sentimentalizes sturdy agrarian values. “That’s probably the real Granger, if you will,” he said. The deliberate exaggeration of the Dibbles material is best exemplified by “Merica,” with its muscled-up combination of Mötley Crüe-style riffs, banjo rolls and absurd patriotic bluster: “We’re back-to-back undefeated world war champs/So take a cup, raise it up for my Uncle Sam.”

Mr. Bones’s fans have come to expect a similarly affectionate strain of irreverence. Growing up in rural Arkansas, he enjoyed the downhome clowning of Jerry Clower and Ray Stevens, but also liked Adam Sandler’s sophomoric ditties. On the Raging Idiots album, he accentuated his own vocal limitations with guest performances from Carrie Underwood and Mr. Paisley. “I don’t want people to think I’m trying to win best male vocalist at the C.M.A.s,” Mr. Bones said, referring to the Country Music Association Awards. “I can sing just good enough to be funny.”

After spending the first decade of his career in other radio formats and doing stand-up comedy on the side, Mr. Bones’s shift to anchoring a Nashville country station generated some skepticism. He and his on-air crew broke with the customary respectful strolls through publicist-approved talking points. “People didn’t want to do the show, because they didn’t know what I would ask,” he said.

Occasionally, Mr. Bones would encourage musicians to participate in daft parodies of their hits; Florida Georgia Line and Dierks Bentley were among the many acts that obliged. As the show’s ratings surged, Mr. Garcia and Mr. Bones brought their musical act to charity events. “We said if we hit a million bucks, we’d try to do a comedy record,” Mr. Bones said. They raised well past that.

Wheeler Walker Jr., who draws an entirely different audience, has an origin story that positions him as a once-and-forever outsider. To hear him tell it, he’s been chewed up and spat out by every label in Nashville, ultimately recording a batch of obscene honky-tonk and Southern rock numbers, the lyrics of each and every one unprintable. “Some of them, this is just me spouting off bad words,” he said, “but sometimes I use my brain a little bit more.” (The character borrows choice autobiographical details — like hailing from Kentucky — from his creator, Mr. Hoffman, 41, who had a Comedy Central sketch show.)

Having Dave Cobb, the Academy of Country Music's 2016 Producer of the Year, produce "Redneck _____" lent the project weight. Still, it required an unorthodox marketing plan, including partnering with a pornography site to preview the music.

Wheeler Walker Jr., who gives interview in character, credited the album's theatrical bravado to his "pent-up aggression."

When he recorded it, he said, he was fed up with "my love life, my work life, my family life, and I just let it all out.

"A lot of people are having those problems too," he continued, "and they can listen to my album and it kind of gets it all out of their system. If you've got those problems, Florida Georgia Line ain't gonna help," he added, referring to the duo who epitomize the "bro country" trend.

By far the wittiest critique of bro country came from female voices striving for a mainstream hearing in 2014, when the then-teenage duo Maddie & Tae teasingly inverted bro country tropes with their debut single, "Girl in a Country Song." "I think that's what made the whole song, was the humor," Maddie Marlow said. "We didn't want people to think, 'Oh, they're just whining.' We want our point to get across, but also we want people to have fun and relate to it and laugh too." These days, cheekiness like Maddie & Tae's — which resurfaced in their singles "Shut Up and Fish" and "Sierra" — is much more common in country than outright comedy is. Luke Bryan is not only country's most popular entertainer but its biggest target for impersonations by other artists, thanks to his ever-present grin and dance moves that play up the silly side of his sex appeal. "He recognizes that as part of what he does, he's going to draw a little bit of jabbing here and there," Mr. Dungan said. "Yes, there is a smile to almost everything he does, and I think that's why he resonates so well."

The Raging Idiots have a bit called "Fake Luke Bryan," in which Mr. Garcia apes Mr. Bryan's unflagging enthusiasm and glottal delivery. But Mr. Bones brushed off the notion that they would have sought the star's blessing before recording the shtick: "I've worked in alternative and pop and sports and hip-hop. This is by far the nicest, take-yourself-the-least-serious format I've been in."