

8

Shares



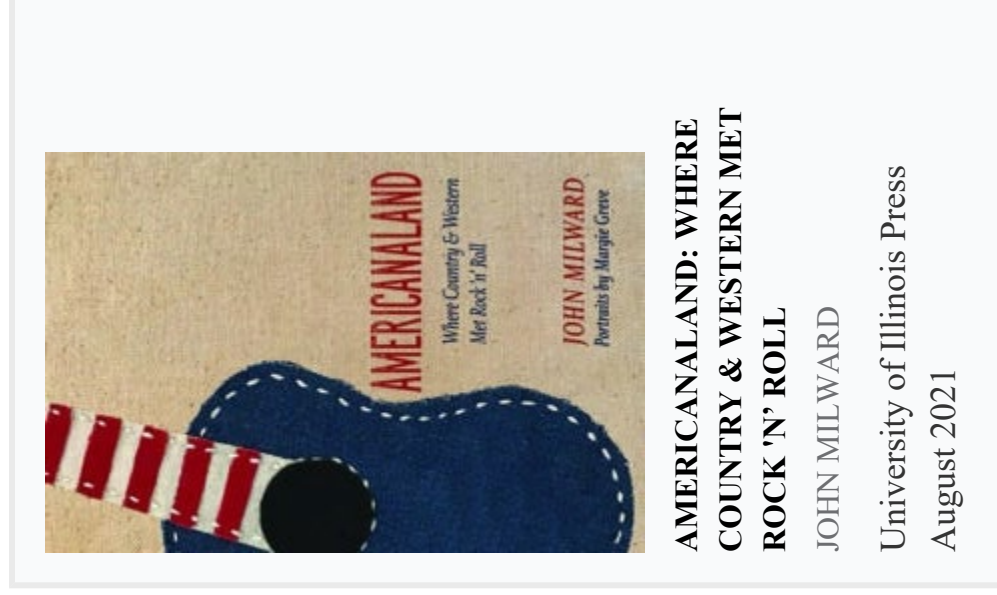
Artwork of Jason Isbell by Margie Greve | *Americanland* (2021) | courtesy of University of Illinois Press

## THE UNMENTIONABLE WHITENESS OF 'AMERICANLAND'



John Milward's new history of Americana puts the mixed genre at the corner of country and rock while slighting race and the music's Black roots and performers.

By **George de Stefano** / 3 November 2021



**T**he problem with *Americanaland*, begins with its subtitle: *Where Country & Western Met Rock 'n' Roll*.

It's catchy and marketable, this idea that a diverse genre represents a meeting of two great streams of American popular music. But it's also reductive and misleading, and worse, racially obtuse. To be clear, I am not imputing any bigotry, intentional or otherwise, to the author. It's just that the limitations of the "country meets rock 'n roll" rubric—and the scant attention paid to Black music throughout the book—results in an incomplete and skewed account that avoids confronting some of Americana's pertinent and

challenging issues.

It's not as if race and racism haven't been raised in discussions of Americana. Artists, members of the recording industry, and journalists have noted the whiteness of the genre for much of the past decade. The title of critic Giovanni Russonello's 2013 essay in the *Atlantic* poses the question, "[Why Is a Music Genre Called 'Americana' So Overwhelmingly White and Male?](#)" "Where, you've got to wonder, are the artists of color? Can a genre that offers itself up as a kind of fantasy soundtrack for this country afford to be so homogeneous and so staunchly archaic?"

Some of Russonello's observations are dismissive, albeit snark: "Americana is music that sticks up for its drinking buddy, remembers the first time the flag was hoisted over the corner store, kicks up dust on its way out of town. After work, it watches TCM." And his view of music that is still being recorded, performed and enjoyed as archaic comes across as populist championing of the new because it is new. But he hit on something about Americana that also applies to John Milward's *Americanaland*: "And it hardly seems like enough to say you're carrying on the legacies of black gospel and blues if the performers and listeners venerating them are almost all white."

In his introduction, Milward quotes the Americana Music Association (AMA) definition of Americana: "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 genre upon which it may draw. While acoustic instruments are often present and vital, Americana also uses a full electric band." Milward calls this a "useful handle", albeit "broad and vague". He prefers "music at the corner of country and rock", a variation on his book's subtitle, even though the AMA definition includes R&B and the blues as fundamental to Americana. Milward explains that his treatment of the blues in *Americanaland* is "spare" because he covered the genre thoroughly in his 2013 book, *Crossroads: How the Blues Shaped Rock 'n'*



*Roll (and Rock Saved the Blues)*. But this strikes me as presumptuous. Did it not occur to him that readers of his new book might not have read its predecessor? He calls the blues “the groundwater of American music” and quotes two white authorities, country singer Marty Stuart and John Lennon, to support that assertion. Milward needn’t have made the blues the central ingredient in *AmericanaLand*. But his cursory treatment of the blues (and of other Black music), and mainly as an influence on white performers, leaves the impression that Americana is white folks’ music. The book’s racial slant extends even to the artwork: of the 27 illustrations (by Margie Greve, Milward’s wife), only two are of Black artists: Chuck Berry and Ray Charles.

This is perplexing on two counts: it overlooks how Black music forms (and so-called white forms with Black roots, like country and bluegrass) are integral to Americana and that race and racial disparities hardly have been absent from industry and journalistic discourses. When Russonello’s essay was published eight years ago, only one Black artist, [Mavis Staples](#), had won an Americana Grammy (for her album, *You Are Not Alone*.) Since then, two others, soul singer [William Bell](#) (2017) and blues singer [Keb’ Mo’](#) (2020), have won. Since 2009, the year the Grammy category was established, four other Black artists have been nominated: Allen Toussaint (2014), Bettye LaVette (2019), J.S. Ondara, and Yola (the latter two in 2020).

The scant recognition by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences isn’t the only issue. In 2017, *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard* reported controversies over what the former publication called “[the Americana Genre’s Identity Crisis](#)“. Both publications highlighted the Americanafest held annually in Nashville and the event’s “[lack of diversity in a commercialized genre that defines itself as being inclusive of multiple formats](#).” Both articles noted that of the 300 performers showcased during Americanafest’s six-day conference and its awards show, only ten percent were not entirely white acts.

[Billboard](#) further reported that in the Americana Awards & Honors show, Rhiannon Giddens and Hurray for the Ruff Raff, both nominated for Album of the Year, “were the sole representations for people of color among nominees.” In 2017, the Album of the Year had never gone to a person of color in 18 years; only two groups led by non-white performers, the Alabama Shakes and the Mavericks, won at the Awards & Honors event.

*Rolling Stone*'s article included this comment from one of the genre's leading and most-acclaimed artists, Roseanne Cash:

“

*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 honored and if amends need to be made, they need to be made. If the Milk Carton Kids and Van Morrison and William Bell can co-exist under the same umbrella, then I think that some deeper blues artists could come under that umbrella as well.*

More recently, Jason Isbell provided an answer to the question in the title of his “What Can I Do to Help?”: giving Black Americana artists exposure on his tours and high-profile gigs like Nashville's Ryman Auditorium.

Also in 2017, the African-American critic Kandia Crazy Horse wrote about “[14 Artists Proving Black Americana Is Real](#)”. in *Paste* magazine. She observed that “people of color performing this style of music slip under the radar too often, perpetuating the false idea that the Americana genre is just for the white and male.”

None of this appears in *Americanaland*. Rather than engaging with these issues, which go to the heart of Americana—what the music is, who makes it, who buys the recordings and goes to the shows—Milward stitches together a chronological account that begins with the 1927 recordings of two famous white acts, singer-songwriter Jimmie Rodgers, a country singer influenced by the blues, and the Carter Family, whose style also had Black roots. Milward proceeds through the evolution of country music, rock 'n' roll, country-rock, and folk-rock to arrive at the present (2020).

Milward crafts an engaging and readable narrative, but it's a partial and incomplete one. (If he sidelines Black artists, Latinos fare worse, with blink-and-you'll-miss-them mentions of the Mavericks and Los Lobos, both Americana Grammy nominees; the Texas Tornados, and Alejandro Escovedo.) Moreover, it's lazy. *Americanaland* is made up almost entirely of

previously published material; of the 251 endnotes, only four sources are original author interviews.

Too much of the material also is overly familiar—Dylan “going electric” at Newport; the Beatles’ influencing folk singers, including Dylan; the Stones making *Exile* while coping with dealers, basement humidity, and Gram Parsons; and the conservative backlash against the Dixie Chicks, are just a few of the oft-told tales Milward recycles. Which raises the question: who is the intended readership for *Americanaland*? Not serious or knowledgeable fans, it would seem.

In the book’s last chapter, Milward surveys some current Americana artists. They include one of the most talented and beloved, [Rhiannon Giddens](#). The singer, multi-instrumentalist, and songwriter gets barely a paragraph of Milward’s attention. He mentions only one of her albums, her 2015 solo debut, *Tomorrow Is My Turn*. Giddens’ former group, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, brilliant exponents of the African American string band tradition and a major attraction in Americanaland, gets just a few sentences.

Riddens’ colleague in the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Dom Flemons, one of the best-known Black artists in Americana, gets not a single mention. Giddens and Flemons, with their wealth of musical knowledge and experience and their outspoken critiques of Americana’s racial politics, would have made great interviewees. If Milward had put aside the clippings and had done some original research.

While giving short shrift to Giddens and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, both established acts, Milward entirely ignores newer Black performers who break the rock-meets-country mold—for example, Lilli Lewis. This year the New Orleans-based singer, pianist, and songwriter released her third album, titled *Americana*, no less. *Rolling Stone* deemed her Queer Country showcase at 2021 Americanafest a highlight of the event. Lewis is one of Americana’s rising stars but not a newcomer. Her omission from *Americanaland* is just another example of how the book, though an enjoyable enough overview, is a missed opportunity.

**TAGS** americana

black music

book feature

culture feature

john milward

Margie Greve

music criticism

music history

<p><input data-bbox="197 1442 254 1487" type="checkbox"/> NORAH JONES PLAYS IT COOL, CLASSIC, AND TIMELESS WITH 'I DREAM OF CHRISTMAS'</p>	<p>METALMATTERS: THE BEST NEW HEAVY ALBUMS OF OCTOBER 2021</p> <p><input data-bbox="174 142 231 188" type="checkbox"/></p>
--	--

---

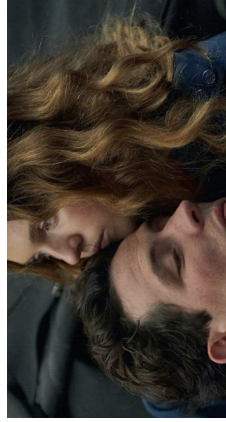
## FEATURED

---

 25 YEARS AGO MADONNA SOUGHT RESPECTABILITY AND  
VALIDATION WITH FILM BIOGRAPHY 'EVITA'

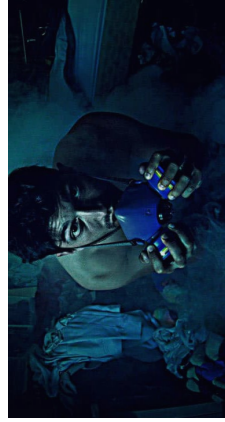


BY **PETER PIATKOWSKI**



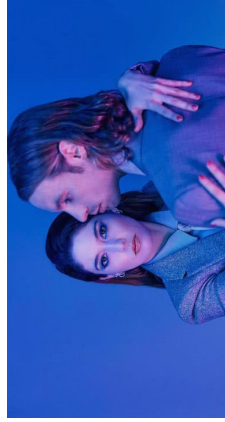
DIRECTOR EVA HUSSON AND PRODUCER ELIZABETH KARLSEN  
ON RISING ABOVE THE POWER DYNAMIC IN 'MOTHERING  
SUNDAY'

BY **PAUL RISKER**



THE IMAGINATION OF DISASTER 2.0: REVISITING SUSAN SONTAG  
IN THE AGE OF THE PANDEMIC HORROR NARRATIVE

BY **JON TOWLSON**



WHY 2022 LOOKS LIKE THE BEST YEAR EVER FOR LIVINGMORE

BY **MICHAEL BIALAS**

---

## RECENT

25 Years Ago Madonna Sought Respectability and Validation with Film Biography 'Evita'



---

Courtney Barnett Takes Comfort on 'Things Take Time, Take Time'

---

Director Eva Husson and Producer Elizabeth Karlsen on Rising Above the Power Dynamic in 'Mothering Sunday'

---

A Comprehensive Look at the Most Creative Moment in Joni Mitchell's Career

---

Pip Blom's 'Welcome Break' Is Cautious But Still As Exuberant As Their Debut

---

FOLLOW US



## ABOUT

---

Masthead

Submission Guidelines

Mission

## BIZ

---

Advertising

Privacy Policy

## FOLLOW US

---

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Spotify

## CATEGORIES

---

Music

Film

Television

Books

Culture

© 1999-2021 PopMatters Media, Inc. All rights reserved. PopMatters is wholly independent, women-owned and operated.



[Learn More](#) | [Privacy](#)