

NASHVILLE SCENE

CMT's new CMT Edge pushes the boundaries of commercial country music — but is 'edge' just another word for the margins?

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Edge of the Country

by Abby White



BRIAN TIPTON/CMT.COM

Turnpike Troubadours do a Concrete Country taping on Lower Broad

The sun is setting on one of those perfect September nights in Nashville, framing a band playing a brief set billed as "Concrete Country" at the intersection of Third and Broadway. Seeing a band perform on a sidewalk in downtown Nashville is not a novel thing in Music City. But these aren't your average buskers playing classic country covers to the bachelorette parties and tourists that swarm past.

The band is gritty Oklahoma quintet the Turnpike Troubadours, and they're playing for Country Music Television as part of an enterprise the Nashville-based cable network hopes will expand the audience, talent pool — and perhaps definition — of commercial country music.

CMT Edge is the network's newest digital venture, focused on showcasing artists on the fringe of country music — a category that the Turnpike Troubadours certainly fit. With their high-octane blend of country, rock,

bluegrass and punk, they are difficult to categorize. There's a term for such hard-to-pigeonhole bands: Americana. Last week, when the locally headquartered Americana Music Association's festival and conference brought more than 100 acts to venues across town, Nashville was filled with more of these "fringe" artists than ever.

Craig Shelburne, a CMT.com writer and producer and a longtime advocate of artists who venture beyond the boundaries of Music Row, is the tastemaker behind the CMT Edge site, which will feature artist interviews, live performances and world premieres. Shelburne, who has worked with CMT since 2002, was part of the team that exposed CMT.com readers to acts such as Hayes Carll, The Avett Brothers, The Civil Wars and The Lumineers early in their respective careers.

While CMT Edge officially launched on Sept. 10, Shelburne explains, years of content served as an instant archive to the new site, which encourages music discovery in three genres.

"We have three categories: Americana, Bluegrass and Classic Country," Shelburne says, though you'll notice that many Edge artists are tagged in multiple categories. "Those three seemed to catch everything that we had been writing about, and for me, the goal of this blog is to make it as simple as possible for the reader to find the music. If you start categorizing too much, putting too many things on the page, it makes it so much more challenging to discover the music, and the whole point is to discover the music."

Leslie Fram, CMT's senior vice president of music strategy, notes that music discovery was already happening at CMT, citing 24-hour sister network CMT Pure — which exclusively airs music videos — as a launchpad for developing artists.

"Roots music has always been written about at CMT," Fram says. "Look over the years at some of the artists that [Shelburne] has written about, or that we've premiered or showcased on CMT Pure, and a lot of these artists fit in that roots world. You can put labels on it, whether it's bluegrass or Americana, but in our music meetings, we just hear things as great music." In general, the announcement of CMT Edge got a positive response from the music community it serves. Grammy and Americana Award-winning producer and consultant Tamara Saviano has worked in the Americana genre for 11 years, and for her, the launch of Edge is a long time coming.

"I knew that someday CMT would catch up," Saviano says. "In the early days of Americana, we all knew that this music was universal and beloved by so many people, but there didn't seem to be a way to get it out to the

broader world. We knew it would only be a matter of time before media outlets understood what we were doing. The music speaks for itself." But some Americana conference attendees — and online trolls, if you care to dig around the comments section wherever news of the Edge launch was posted — grumbled that CMT is behind the game and that this should have happened years ago.

"A lot of people asked me, 'What took so long?' I really think it's because technology is so good now that these bands can make videos cheaper," Shelburne says. "We have this whole wealth of creative videos that we love, and we have a place to put them."

Another piece of the puzzle, according to Fram, is that more people are discovering music by watching videos. As an example, she cites the aforementioned Avetts, who premiered their "Live and Die" video on CMT in conjunction with CMT Edge on Sept. 14.

"It's amazing how people are still discovering them!" Fram says. She explains that the continually rising popularity of music discovery through videos, paired with advances in affordable technology, created opportunities that simply didn't exist before, allowing CMT to increase their coverage of these fringe artists.

"We knew that this was a force to be reckoned with, this whole roots movement," she says. "It gave us the opportunity to have an extension of what we were already doing."

To some, however, there's a concern that compartmentalizing these artists on a separate website implies they're not worthy of coverage from mainstream avenues CMT and CMT.com, perpetuating their outsider status. Craig Havighurst, senior producer at *Music City Roots*, the roots and Americana radio show that broadcasts live from the Loveless Cafe each Wednesday, says that while the attention from a major country cable network is a positive thing, perhaps the edge is too far from the bulls-eye.

"Like other shows and branded zones in the past, Edge has a bit of a 'special needs' feeling about it," Havighurst says via email. "When people speak (unfortunately and incorrectly) of Americana as a musical 'ghetto,' could it be because editorially it's often cordoned off in its own section, on the assumption that only a portion of the total audience could ever possibly care?"

While Havighurst speaks highly of Shelburne's role at the Edge, calling him "beyond qualified," and says that CMT has "admirably" exposed great American country-related music, he doesn't skirt the issue that perpetually plagues the commercial country format — and all commercial music formats, for that matter.

"Another way of looking at it is to ask, if you're a country music network and news organization, wouldn't you WANT to cover the heck out of Jason Isbell, Old Crow [Medicine Show], The Civil Wars, etc.," Havighurst writes, "and isn't your *obligation* to ferret out the most interesting unknowns regardless of a radio-ready sound and give them exposure? Edge, or rather the perceived need for it, is a stark admission that CMT's coverage of country STARTS with FM radio chart position/media Q rating and is then tempered by critical musical judgment, rather than the other way around." Another question is whether CMT Edge will appeal to audiences from CMT and CMT.com. Under the media behemoth Viacom, CMT.com is the most visited country music website, with an average of 1.6 million unique visitors and 3.8 million video streams each month. Through television, CMT reaches more than 92 million homes nationwide. With this considerable captive audience, what is the potential for crossover success for an artist on the Edge?

Fram explains that the network plans to mix Edge-approved videos in their regular rotation, and CMT Pure will feature 30-minute blocks of Edge artists. "It's what we formally called 'Wide Open,' which was really always about the edge of country, so now it just has a new name," she says.

Shelburne adds that the programmed Edge content videos will have a CMT Edge logo in the corner, driving viewers to the site. Back in February, he recalls, CMT.com premiered Dualtone breakout band The Lumineers' crossover hit "Ho Hey," which is now in rotation on CMT. "It took a while to get it on the air, but now it's on the air," he says. "So now, when The Lumineers [video] shows up on screen, it has 'CMT Edge' in the corner, so people will see that video and wonder, 'What's CMT Edge?' And they'll type it in, and there it is!"

As Fram previously remarked, the roots movement is a force to be reckoned with. The Americana Music Association just experienced its biggest year yet: The professional trade organization's membership is up by 45 percent compared to 2006; the yearly festival showcases twice the number of bands it did five years ago; and this year's overall attendance was around 15,000, as opposed to the roughly 10,000 reported in 2011. CMT Edge can boost Americana's profile even higher, says Michelle Aquilato, marketing director for the Americana Music Association.

"It's great that CMT is supporting these amazing Americana artists and exposing them to a wider audience," Aquilato says.

It doesn't hurt Americana's cause that the CMT team already admires a lot of its artists. Ask Fram and Shelburne which up-and-coming artists they're excited about, and their eyes light up as they enthuse over spirited husband-

and-wife duo Shovels & Rope, retro-country spitfire Nikki Lane, or West Coast buzz band Nicki Bluhm & The Gramblers.

"We're all big music fans, so any night of the week, we're at a show somewhere," Fram says. They also have plans to work with like-minded music aficionados outside the country music format altogether.

"I've been really encouraged that some of these artists have been able to spread over to Triple A radio," Fram says. "I've actually talked to WRLT about doing some stuff. We're in the early stages of discussing some partnerships."

"We taped 12 bands [last] week, and so many of them were from out of town because we wanted to get people while they're here for Americana," Shelburne says. "But the next step is to really invest in local singers and songwriters, and take the Nashville center of Americana out into the world, too."

Shelburne says he'd love to see Concrete Country tapings like the Troubadours' move to the television networks. And why not? As a randomly selected conference attendee remarked last week, "Americana artists sure are getting a lot better-looking." Perhaps Americana's Taylor Swift is just one music video away from busting the genre wide open.