



CMA: Gold Certified 50 Years of Advancing Country

In 1952, WSM-AM/Nashville inaugurated an annual convention weekend honoring Country radio disc jockeys for playing Grand Ole Opry stars. That event spawned the Country Disc Jockey Association. But by the mid-'50s, the exploding popularity of rock 'n' roll led to Top 40 rapidly displacing many full-time Country stations and Country segments of "variety" stations.

By June 1958, a group of artists, managers, agents, promoters, publishers and others, realizing their livelihoods were at stake, convened with the struggling CDJA to establish an all-industry trade group. On November 20, 1958, the Country Music Association was born, not only to support various professional segments, but also, crucially, to protect and advance the viability of Country radio. Fifty years later, the three enduring executive leaders of the CMA reflect on the organization's service, radio's importance and their own place in its history.

Jo Walker-Meador, 1962-1991

Connie B. Gay, an owner of several stations, was our founding President. I'd been doing PR work and didn't know a thing about country music, but came to work December 8, 1958 as a gal Friday to set up the office, be bookkeeper, receptionist, stenographer – the works – for incoming executive director, [former WSM GM] Harry Stone. My salary was \$235 a month. CMA intended to support itself through artists donating their time doing benefit shows. We did a couple – first in Louisville with Johnny Cash and His Tennessee Two, Jean Shepard, Carl Smith and others. We cleared a little money, but could see it wasn't going to work. And when Harry left (by mutual consent) at the end of 1959 because CMA just didn't have the money to pay him, I was the lucky one who got to stay.

Our first slogan was "Best Liked, Worldwide" – we intended to be an international organization from the beginning. The biggest challenge was getting people to realize we were there to benefit everybody. There were many important live radio shows like the *Grand Ole Opry*, including the *Louisiana Hayride*, the *Big D* in Dallas, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* in Richmond and the *Midwestern Hayride* in Cincinnati. WSM thought we had formed to help make those shows bigger, more competitive to the *Opry*, while people at those shows thought CMA was just another promotion arm for the *Opry*!

Getting more country back on radio was most important. We studied markets and went after stations where we thought there was potential for Country. Several successful radio executives, PDs and DJs volunteered to visit stations to show them how to program the music and sell commercial time. At one point, five major market stations switched to Country within a few months, and it took off from there.

In 1963, to help Country radio sell to the national market, we went to New York for the advertising community's Sales Executives Club meeting at the Roosevelt Hotel. Gene Autry was our President, and I arranged for us to host a luncheon and give away a beautiful Tennessee Walking Horse away as a door prize. We brought the horse to New York and Gene rode it up the elevator and into the ballroom. It created quite a sensation.

In the late '70s, I wrote President Carter to see if he would be interested in hosting a reception for the board. He said he'd be delighted, and we had a state dinner with dancing in Washington. Tom T. Hall, Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty performed, backed by Harold Bradley and four more session musicians. It was a long way for me – a farm girl from Tennessee – to be in the White House.

Ed Benson, 1992-2006

In 1992, we were in the midst of the biggest boom in country music's history, but there were sea changes going on. Superstar acts were beginning to become their own economic centers, and we would see artists become bigger than their labels. Another was the rapid consolidation of radio ownership, where before the labels had always been the "big dog" in their relationship with the independently owned stations. And lurking beneath was the biggest issue of all – the early evolution of digital delivery of music.

In 1988 CMA integrated regular strategic planning into the mix, allowing the board to begin focusing CMA's resources and energies. CMA would analyze its events, its market development initiatives and even its board structure, striving to do things to have the most impact on the health of the industry and the organization. CMA's success in executing its strategic direction helped keep the organization vital and in an important leadership role.

From the very beginning, radio was understood to be integral to CMA efforts to broaden the awareness of country music to the world. So CMA always devoted considerable resources to a healthy Country radio environment to help radio market itself better and get a larger slice of the ad revenue pie. In 1989, we launched CMA's biggest-ever initiative to sell Country to ad agencies and

CMA's original Board of Directors in 1959: (seated) Steve Sholes, Chairman Wesley Rose, President Connie B. Gay, Dee Kilpatrick, Cindy Walker, Pee Wee King, Cracker Jim Brooker; (standing) Len Ellis, Joe Lucas, Paul Ackerman, Ken Nelson, Don Pierce, J. William Denny, Mac Wiseman and Harold Moon

corporate marketers. The advent of the "America's Sold On Country" campaign made CMA the first organization to go into ad agencies and corporate headquarters to pitch not a media vehicle, but a type of music. In the 1990s, CMA increased the number of radio representatives on its board and continued to actively support and be a lead sponsor of CRS.

Among our biggest accomplishments during my time included moving Fan Fair to downtown and changing its name to the *CMA Music Festival*. And in 2005, two huge things happened: the first-ever CMA Awards in New York and the six-year deal making ABC the new network partner of the Awards.

Some of my favorite memories were establishing CMA's London office in 1982, and working with some of our industry's talented and visionary leaders. The late Irving Waugh influenced me so much by his uncompromising standards for excellence. And, of course, the constant example of Jo Walker-Meador's love and devotion to CMA. I also got to know some of the real characters in our industry like the great Joe Talbot, Merle Kilgore and Walter Miller.

And I will always be glad to have known and been inspired by so many gifted and brilliant creators of our music. There are the successes and accomplishments, but unquestionably what endures the most are the friendships and the relationships.



Tammy Genovese, Ed Benson, and Jo Walker-Meador

Tammy Genovese, 2006-present

My thoughts centralize around CMA being more of the business trade association for this community. Not that we haven't done that in the past, but in these difficult times our industry's having with the economy and within the digital world, it feels like this is the time when CMA should step up and do things our industry does not have the resources for right now.

One of those is a major research project we're in the middle of: who's buying, where they live and how to market to them in the digital age. For CMA to be the focal point, the driving force behind the business – that's where I want to be.

More than 2,000 radio stations promote country. What they do for this music and their communities is huge, and they give us credibility. They offer such diversity – from more traditional artists like Brad Paisley to Taylor Swift, who reaches another demo in a whole different world. But it's all still country music, and that's the great thing about who we are as a format and what we do.

We were very pleased with the *CMA Awards* ratings and the record sales that followed. ABC couldn't be happier; they're the best television partners we've ever had. The promos were very reflective of our music and artists, and sent a fabulous message to the network TV world. The marketing committee of the CMA board worked very closely with our staff and ABC to determine strategically where we should spend our marketing dollars and whom we were going after. And it paid off.

Certainly Jo and Ed, with their great wisdom, vision and judgment, set the tone for us to be able to enjoy what we have right now at CMA. I've been here a long time, but being able to sit with the top leaders of the industry is still almost humbling. I learn and grow every day.

Our board members could walk in with their own burdens of life and the economy on their shoulders. But what's most enlightening and refreshing is that they take off their own business hats, put on their CMA hats and ask, "What can we do for this genre?" They have been leaders in this business so long, and that they continue to make it a priority to come together for the good of the industry just makes me want to work that much harder to bring it all to fruition.

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