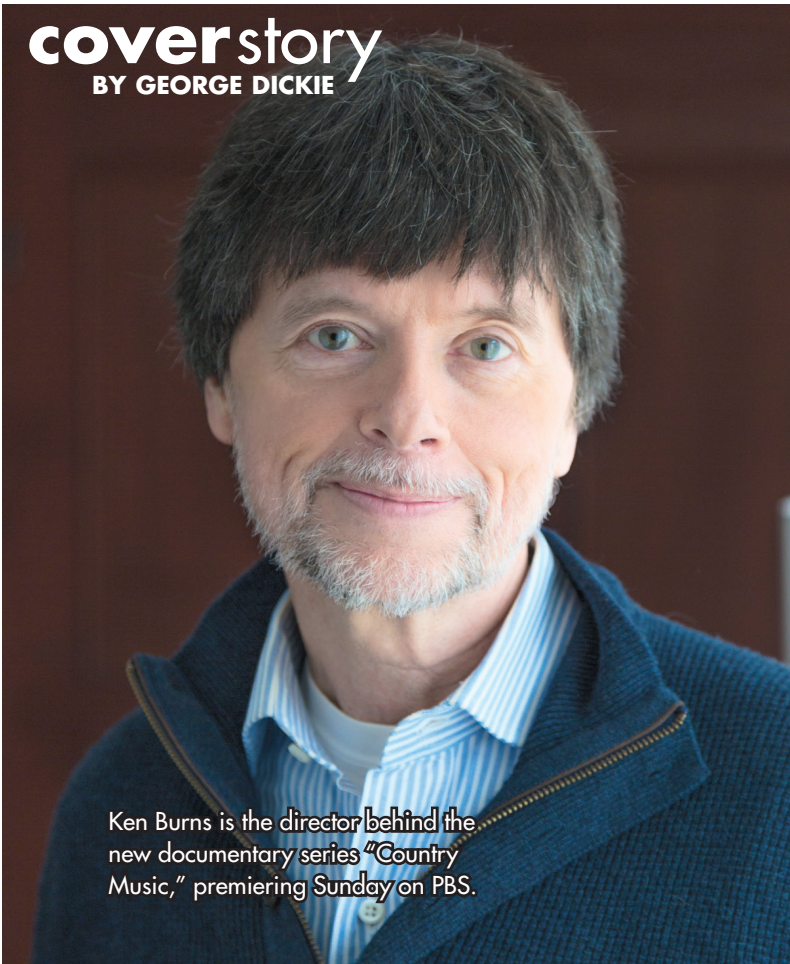


**coverstory**  
BY GEORGE DICKIE



Ken Burns is the director behind the new documentary series "Country Music," premiering Sunday on PBS.

# Ken Burns' 'Country Music' tells a tale of an art form born from love and loss

No matter how you feel about country music, one needn't be a fan to appreciate "Country Music."

Indeed, Ken Burns' latest epic, premiering Sunday, Sept. 15, on PBS (check local listings), is an eight-part, 16-hour documentary that explores the history of the genre, from its roots in Appalachia in the 1920s and '30s through its evolution in the South, Southwest and Midwest in the mid- and late-20th century to its decidedly more rock-and-roll-like sound of today.

Along the way, the documentary tells the stories of the pioneers who helped shape the music, among them Jimmie Rodgers, Bill Monroe, Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Charlie Pride, Loretta Lynn, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Garth Brooks and the Carter family, whose songs tell the stories of the hardships and joys experienced by ordinary people.

"It's three chords and the truth," says Burns, quoting legendary songwriter Harlan Howard. "It does not have the sophistication of classical or some forms of jazz but it has the truth. You can hear the lyrics and they're describing universal human things and we disguise it. We love to pretend that country music is about pick-up trucks and hound dogs and six-packs of beer and good ole' boys. ... No, that's a subgenre. What country music talks about are two four-letter words that most of us get uncomfortable talking about, and that's love and loss."

The film does a good job of explaining the structure of country, with jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis pointing out that country has its roots in blues, folk and jazz. It also explains the origins of elements like the "blue yodel" and the yelps of "A-ha," which became staples of early country music. Clips of early performances by Monroe and others bear that out.

It also offers up a treasure trove of interviews, including with many of the above.

Burns, who grew up working in a record store in his native Ann Arbor, Mich., knew about country but was not a fan. That changed after years of work on this project, which he called "daily humiliations of what I didn't know."

As to what surprised him most, he says, "Everything."

"The racial component," he says, "the extent to which the pantheon of the early days of country music is filled with African-American influence, that the banjo is from Africa. That your strong women from the very beginning and well before anybody in rock and folk is picking up women's issues, they may not call themselves feminists or talk about women's liberation.

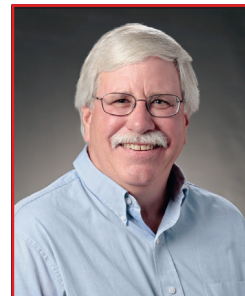
"Loretta Lynn is singing, 'Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' With Lovin' on Your Mind' or 'The Pill,'" he continues. "And I wonder what black eye (the Jefferson Airplane's) Grace Slick would have gotten if she had been talking about that in her circle. ..."

"And (Lynn) says, 'If you're talking about your life and you're telling the truth, it's going to be country.'"

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