

Beginning in 1925, the “Grand Ole Opry” radio show has been broadcast live every Saturday night on WSM in Nashville (650 on the AM dial, 8:00 p.m. eastern time). During much of the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s the broadcast was carried nationwide on NBC, and even when it was not, WSM’s signal could be heard throughout the South and Midwest and through most of the US. For more than eighty years now, most of the great stars of Country music have appeared on the show and, especially in the middle of the twentieth century, were regular participants, designated ‘members.’

There have been many millions of regular listeners to the “Grand Ole Opry.” The extent to which we might designate such listeners as “members,” and as being thereby incumbents of a valued **role**, is of course limited. The activity of listening, even weekly, is not a role; a role is interactive, relational. Being a devoted “Grand Ole Opry” fan could be immensely satisfying, perhaps could feel subjectively like a role, but objectively would seem to remain remain just an activity.

But let us place ourselves in others’ shoes, in another time and place. Nineteen-thirties, in the South or Midwest, living on a farm, no telephone, no television, hardly any money, often quite an isolated life. Then every Saturday night, you and your family gather around the radio and listen to the “Grand Ole Opry.” Simultaneously nearly all of your neighbors are listening, and next day at church or during the week at the cotton gin or the hardware store, the radio show will be a topic of conversation. In this way, being a “regular,” or a “fan” could be said to become a role, in fact a **valued role**, a source of connection to other people. In the same way, of course, in support to devalued people we can readily take a person’s interest or activity and seek to craft a valued role upon that foundation: Red Sox fan, video game devotee, gardener, artist. These are solitary activities, but they can be a route toward relationship, belonging, and community—if we consciously craft a valued role with or for the person.

I had never heard of the “Grand Ole Opry” until I moved to Georgia and was introduced to Bluegrass music in 1977. I did not listen to the radio show, but I was given a record album entitled “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” which was a tribute to the Country music tradition. The opening song on the album was the theme song of the radio show, and its lyrics named many of the members and songs of the Grand Ole Opry from the 1920’s through the 1950’s:

“The Grand Ole Opry Song” (by Hilo Brown)

Come and listen to my story, if you will. I’m going to tell
About a gang of fellers from down at Nashville.
First I’ll start with old Red Foley doing the “Chattanooga Shoe,”
And we can’t forget Hank Williams with them good old “Lovesick Blues.”

It's time for Roy Acuff to go to Memphis on his train
With Minnie Pearl and Rod Brasfield and Lazy Jim Day.
Turn on all your radios, I'm sure that you will wait
To hear Little Jimmy Dickens sing "Take an Old Cold 'Tater and Wait."

(chorus)

There was Uncle Dave Macon, his gold tooth and plug hat,
Cowboy Copas singing "Tragic Romance,"
"Signed, Sealed, and Delivered," with Sam and Kirk McGee,
And the master of ceremonies was Mr. George D. Hay.

There was Lonzo and Oscar, a-poppin' bubble gum,
George Morgan singing "Candy Kisses," yum yum,
"Got a Hole in My Bucket", "Bringing in That Georgia Meal,"
We'll sing "The Sunny Side of the Mountain" and dance to the "Chicken Reel."

(chorus)

You can talk about your singers in all kinds of ways,
But none could sing the old songs like Bradley Kincaid,
With his old hound dog, guitar, and the famous "Blue-Tailed Fly,"
"String Bean" with Hank Snow, and old Fiddlin' Chubby Wise.

Chorus:

There'll be guitars, fiddles, and banjo-picking too,
Bill Monroe singing out them old "Kentucky Blues,"
Ernest Tubb's number, "Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right,"
On the "Grand Ole Opry" every Saturday night.

My Georgia colleague and fellow teacher of Normalization, David Truran, became my tour guide to Country music, and together we looked up all of the musicians named in the "Grand Ole Opry Song" in the Encyclopedia of Country Music. I bought about twenty albums by Bill Monroe, called the Father of Bluegrass Music, and even bought a mandolin with the (sadly failed) intention of learning to play bluegrass music. David and other local Normalization teachers (Connie Lyle, Al and Ellen Marks, Linda Harrington, sometimes John O'Brien) and I formed a circle to gather every couple of weeks and sing together, always closing with "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

In February 1978, David and Linda and Connie and John and I attended the six-day Planning Workshop presented by Dr. Wolfensberger and his associates of the Training Institute. The workshop was held in Nashville, and on Saturday night of the workshop a large group of us went to the "Grand Ole Opry" and watched the radio show being performed.

Several incongruities and anachronisms about that occasion come to memory. There were students and presenters of a Training Institute workshop playing the role of tourist **during** the workshop. Few if any of our group were lifelong Country music fans; most of our group would not have known the names of any of the performers we watched. We were in a concert hall seating 4000, but the format was not that of a concert but was a radio show: applause signs, live commercials, each musician doing only one or two songs, master of ceremonies making introductions and doing live advertisements between each song. The opening theme song (lyrics above) was written more than twenty years earlier and named artists of the past. And most disconcerting (and exciting, to me) was that four of the musicians named in the “Grand Ole Opry Song” were there, singing, live and in person—I thought they were dead!

So it was in visiting Nashville that I had the opportunity for an interest to grow into a role, albeit temporary. The same happened for Jo Massarelli’s late friend Jim Farrell. Jo tells this story wonderfully in presenting Social Role Valorization; I am stealing it with her permission, and with thanks to Jim.

Jo offered to assist and accompany her friend Jim on a vacation trip, and asked where he might want to go. Jim had lived an isolated life and had never been on a real vacation, but he knew immediately where he wanted to go: to attend the Grand Ole Opry, and to tour the homes of the great Country music stars in Nashville. Now Jo enjoys music, but is more attuned to folk and classical and the blues—not at all to Country music. She tried to talk him into someplace else, but Jim was certain of his decision. Country music was his passion; Jo probably thought silently, “there’s no accounting for taste.”

The high point of the trip for Jim, and the low point for Jo, came when they joined a bus tour of the homes of the Country stars. Jim was enthusiastic, somewhat to Jo’s embarrassment, and insisted on sitting right up front beside the tour guide. Then, to her further embarrassment, Jim started to add embellishment to the tour guide’s descriptions, ringing out his additions in a full voice so that all the tour participants could hear. When the guide got some detail wrong and Jim corrected him out loud, the tour guide handed Jim the microphone with a big smile, and said, “You can do it better than I can.” Jim proceeded to narrate the rest of tour. The guide told whose house they were passing, then Jim told everyone what were their big hits and when, with whom they were married and divorced, and myriad other details of the lives of the Country stars. All the other riders were amazed and impressed: this fellow with obvious impairments really knew Country music! And his friend Jo was amazed and impressed: how did Jim know all this? Where did this passion come from, which inspired Jim to step up with astoundingly unexpected competence in such a valued role?

Jo learned the answer from Jim. Where that passion came from is not told as part of the SRV story; Jim's role as a tour guide in Nashville is told as a story of people with impairments confounding our low expectations, an SRV story genre with many hilarious and glorious examples.

Where the passion came from is this: as Jim was growing up with his family in the 1950's, his parents were ashamed of his impairments and of the unusualness of his facial features. He was isolated within the home, and he never had any friends. He felt the desperate loneliness of his childhood most acutely on Saturday nights, when almost every week his parents would have guests over for cards and conversation. They told Jim each week he must stay in his room and never show his face. So every Saturday night, Jim would sit alone in his room and listen to the "Grand Ole Opry." For Jim Farrell, all those names in the "Grand Ole Opry Song" were not entries in an encyclopedia of Country music; they were his only friends in the world.

Rest in peace, Jim. Fear not: the circle will be unbroken.