

## ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

[Sad to the Bone](#)

# Solemn country -- Up-tempo bands like Lone Justice and Jason & the Scorchers are being replaced by mellow groups

By [Chris Willman](#) | Apr 19, 1996

Are you ready for the country? Neil Young's rhetorical question resonates anew every few years with another cult of not-necessarily-corn-fed rock enthusiasts. This time last decade, up-tempo bands like Lone Justice and Jason & the Scorchers were two-stepping to a halt after seemingly exhausting the seismic links between bluegrass and punk.

Exit pogoing, enter Prozac taking. In '96, much of the new hybrid sometimes labeled insurgent country is distinctly solemn. Influenced by '60s godfather Gram Parsons, celebrated bands like Son Volt, the Scud Mountain Boys, Tarnation, Blue Mountain, Freakwater, and Palace all tend toward an introspective indie rock that's whiskey soaked — with a stiff morphine chaser.

Don't blame some mad cowpunk disease for the sadder spirit of today's alterna-country. "It's down to the people themselves," says Gary Louris, formerly of the Jayhawks and a member of the quasi-supergroup Golden Smog. "I happen to be a pretty melancholy person. Jay and Jeff [Farrar and Tweedy, of the defunct, genre-spearheading Uncle Tupelo] are the same way." Their music holds special sway for older alterna-rockers who might prefer their cool generational disillusionment couched in the warmer chords and instrumentation of tradition.

These bands were first clumped into a loose movement two years ago in an America Online folder labeled No Depression, after a seminal Uncle Tupelo album that was, in turn, named after a Carter Family gospel song lyric. The moniker turns up again on the masthead of a new quarterly magazine. *No Depression* coeditor Peter Blackstock sees the "bad name" country rock earned among the Eagles-weary intelligentsia being reversed by a slew of mandolin-wielding bands "coming out of their garages with a real do-it-yourself ethic and attitude."

The heirs apparent to Parsons' spiritual fortune are Son Volt, whose debut, *Trace* — with its alternately comforting and disquieting meditations about moving on and mortality — has the timeless feel of a classic. Crunchier songs like "Drown" sound at home on rock radio, but Volt leader Farrar admits some who show up for a full set might be thrown by the laptop steel guitars: "To this day, there's a stigma attached to country music. I know a lot of it has to do with what comes out of Nashville — which is completely justified."

Meanwhile, Smog's Louris bemoans the image a "movement" suggests: "It's not like we sit around and hold historic country summit meetings where we play 'Hot Burrito #2'," he quips. But any way you look at it, now more than ever, Parsons, the grievous angel, has a happy legacy.