



CAMILLE MCCOY/staff photographer

Cecilia Lee sings with the Stillwater Band, which took first at the recent Marlboro Country Music Roundup.

Pickin', grinnin' and winnin'



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Cooley Pope (left) of Rochester and Dennis Duncan, members of the Cooley Pope Band, strummed their way to second place.

By Chuck Moss
special writer

"You broke my heart so I busted your jaw." Well, OK. See, I'm your typical refugee from the 1960s, via New Wave. To me, country western music means twang, bizarre punch lines, and class overtones I'd rather not contemplate. So what the baby blue-eyed blazes am I doing at Pontiac's High Kicker Saloon on a warm Thursday night when I could be home watching Max Headroom on the VCR?

See tonight, Thursday, April 16, the High Kicker hosts the finals of the Marlboro Country Music Roundup. Sponsored by Phillip Morris, the cigarette people, this contest will pit nine area country-western bands against each other, each in 15 minute sets. The winner gets \$5,000 prize money and the chance to open the April 25 Alabama-Georgia Strait concert at Joe Louis Arena. Not too shabby.

There have been offs and semifinals and now it all boils down to tonight's battle of the bands. One lucky and talented outfit will get a big break and a big shot at the brass ring and maybe go on to fame and fortune. These things happen; this is America.

BUT WHO are these folks who sing about coal miner's daughters and Folsom Prison blues? Who listens? What possesses a person to load on five tons of sequins and a platinum banjo? What's it all about anyway?

Well, for Cooley Pope, it's about life. "Country music is all about true experiences," says Pope. "It's good experiences, bad experiences. It's about reality and heartbreak can be part of reality. If someone comes up and says, 'Your song sounds depressing,' I say 'thanks!'"

Pope, is a tall, rangy mustached 34 year old. He's a native of Pontiac who makes his home in downtown Rochester, but "I spent

three months out of every year in Kentucky. Country music, that's all the music we had. Cooley Pope has his own painting service, but "that's just for surviving. Music is what I'm all about." He's leader of a C-W band that goes under his name. "I had my first band when I was in 10th grade."

Cooley Pope is a finalist in the contest. Why is he competing? "Cause the winner gets five grand and the chance to play Joe Louis." Fair enough?

POPE SPEAKS quietly, at first ill at ease and properly truculent, but upon opening up becomes intelligent and articulate. "I'm into the music real seriously now. I write my own songs, I want to get a recording contract. If I play for George Strait, I'll meet him on the stage and press a tape right into his hand."

What gets a guy into this music, anyway? "My father," Pope says matter-of-factly. "He was a musician. He's the one, really got me started, always had a guitar around."

"Country music is about life, true-life stories. That stuff about 'divorce' and stuff. That's real. Real personal to me. Sometimes, when I'm singing, I think about my folks, or something that happened to me . . ." Pope shrugs. "Country music is real."

Pope was married once, may be again. "Dodie Cameron is her name. I'd like to get married. She doesn't think I'm serious. Maybe, if she sees it in the paper, she'll know it's true."

So here it is, Dodie, in the paper. But what about tonight? Pope is on edge, but calm. "I pray a lot. I think that helps. We'll see tonight."

BY SEVEN o'clock you can't get a seat in the High Kicker. The contest is sponsored by Marlboro, and they meet you at the door with cigarettes. You walk in, they give you Marlboros. You go to the bathroom, they give you Marlboros. You order drinks, they give you Marlboros. The air is solid with cigarette smoke and pictures of the Marlboro man are everywhere. I don't normally smoke, but what the heck? I break open a pack but no matches. I ask for matches; they give me Marlboros.

The "media table" is crammed with groupies from a radio station, so I fall in with some folks from a local bar. They're deep and loyal partisans of the Cadillac Cowboys, another contestant band. From Angela "a real southern hillbilly . . . southern Sicily that is," to the lady bar owner who's the mother-in-law of the band leader, these folks have come in a bus to root for their team.

Opposite me sits Wally, a balding and soft-spoken guy who wises me up about the C-W scene. "It's easy to get into. If you listen to a song long enough, you'll find one you can relate to. You'll find it's all about life." I'm beginning to get it.

The crowd is your basic Michigan group, a bit blue collar, but sporting every variety of dress from 1850's Riverboat Gambler to one or two loose-tie yuppies. "That's right," Wally smiles. "Very tolerant. You wear what's right." U.S. flags on the seat of your pants? Wally smiles again. "Not that tolerant."

THE STAGE sports a banner of the Marlboro Man. One side is a giant photo of John Wayne, on the other: Elvis Presley. In between is an American flag. The announcer reads the rules, the first band is up: it's time to go!

Up steps a band that looks like a bunch of goofy space cowboys, fronted by a punked-out blonde with a Naugahyde mouth. They play a vigorous couple of songs, based on high energy and jingoistic political values. Wally shakes his head. "That's not country," he slips a Budweiser. "That's Jimi Hendrix."

"Wait till you hear OUR band!" Angela cheerleads.

Fifteen minutes playing, five minutes between bands. Another group begins. Wally nods. "That's more like it." These folks are doing an old Gene Autry tune, Texas swing. The crowd stands, claps, sings; each band has a cheering section that roots immediately. Waitresses bustle through the smoky gloom, hefting trays of Bud cans and plastic cups filled with weird mixed drinks for the women.

SOME BANDS have a very simple, Appalachian sound to them: hillbilly, bluegrass. Others are slick, pro, almost like mid-'60s black R & B. Clearly Country and Western embraces a wide range. The cigarette people are hustling, everybody is smoking now. You see really get into smoking these things; what a shame they kill you.

After a brief intermission, Cooley Pope gets up. He's dressed in an austere suit and an oversize stetson, looking almost 1940-ish. Hank Williams Sr. style. His music is anything but musty, though. It's a very energetic, steel-guitar sound and Pope's band has a real polish to them. His original number, "Mom and Dad," is tight, professional. He ends with a flourish.

More bands play. A slick bar band from Sault Ste. Marie has a good reception, then a fiddle-playing lady tears into a medley of favorites. This group, Stillwater, is first-rate bunch of entertainers. They're suddenly the favorites.

LAST GROUP Boom. Silence. The judges tote up the score. Angela has it figured: Stillwater Band first, Cadillac Cowboys second. Wally holds his peace. The announcements. Third prize: \$500.00. Cadillac Cowboys!

Third! Not too bad. My pals all leap and hug. The Cadillac Cowboys leader vows to use

the money for a major party. At Mom-in-law's bar. I hope. Now, who comes second?

Second Prize: One Thousand Dollars: Cooley Pope! I clap. It's not playing Joe Louis, but a thousand bucks ain't too shabby.

First prize: Stillwater. Of course. The Phillip Morris people present a three-by-four foot check. I round over to see Cooley. He's not too disappointed. "It's all bonus," he smiles. "Real life."

So the Roundup is over, the winners high and losers hurtin'. Six hours of country music: what is it all about? Real life. Art. Entertainment, showmanship, a hallowed American form of music overlaid with Hollywood, hype and down-to-earth relevancy. Life, love, one thousand dollars. That's country.



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Larry Lee Adkins of Westland was one of nine finalists who qualified for the country roundup finals.



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Mike Irish fiddles about for the Cooley Pope Band.