

# Producer Pete Anderson Leads Calif.'s Gold Rush

BY HOLLY GLEASON

LOS ANGELES With the success of Dwight Yoakam's gold albums ("Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc." and "Hillbilly Deluxe"), producer Pete Anderson has found a beachhead from which to launch the re-birth of the California country sound. Laced with Mexican-influenced rhythms, an often melancholy sense of melody, and a strong honky-tonk approach, it is a sound that was popularized by artists like Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Wanda Jackson back when Capitol Records' country division was run out of Los Angeles.

But Anderson isn't sure he wants to call what he's doing with artists ranging from George High-

fill (Warner Bros.) to Rosie Flores (Reprise) California country.

"I don't know if it's so much a resurgence of the California country sound as much as it is a resurgence of country music," Anderson says. "I don't like the label of traditional country music because either it's country or it's not." Some country radio programming has Anderson baffled: "There's a lot of stuff on country radio that has almost nothing to do with country radio. But the bottom line is that people know what's real country music and they're responding. They're going out and voting with their \$9 by buying Randy Travis, Dwight Yoakam, and the Judds." He adds, "That's the kind of music I'm trying to

make."

Yoakam and Anderson met while playing in bands and discovered they shared mutual attitudes about music. When Yoakam needed a guitarist, he called on the Detroit-born Anderson.

Yoakam's group, playing songs by Yoakam himself in addition to solid country numbers by such legends as Haggard, found at first that the going wasn't easy. "We kept getting fired," Anderson recalls. "I think we got fired from every place we ever played."

Figuring that the average club owner didn't understand the group's vision, Anderson talked Yoakam into cutting an EP. Anderson remembers that the release, promoted and distributed by

an alternative firm in Hollywood, Calif., "kind of stuck out in the pile of TSOL and Hell Comes To Your House records." The grass-roots rock press embraced the record, praising it as honest and authentic. Soon, the Nashville labels started showing interest. Paige

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Rowden from Warner Bros. finally inked Yoakam.

"Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc., Etc." was licensed and rereleased with four additional tracks. Though country music was still experiencing its much-touted slump, "Honky-Tonk Man" went to No. 1, and the rest is history. If Nashville had been leery about outside forces prior to Yoakam's success, the situation started changing shortly thereafter. Chris Hillman & the Desert Rose Band were signed to MCA/Curb, while Warner Bros. picked up Anderson-produced acts like Flores and Highfill in addition to the highly successful Highway 101.

Anderson says the reasons for Nashville's opening up go beyond Yoakam's success. "Jim Ed Norman [head of Warner Bros./Nashville] is fairly progressive, and he used to live out here," he says. "So did Tony Brown at MCA. There are a lot of people in Nashville now who either moved back or got jobs and ended up there, so naturally these people aren't going to be as unsure or as afraid of the West Coast as their predecessors were."

Not being a part of the Nashville hierarchy works to Anderson's advantage, he believes, since he doesn't waste time worrying about what everyone else is doing. He feels many country music establishment leaders don't understand his mission. "I have a good relationship with those people because of Dwight's success . . . but I really don't think they know what I'm about or understand what I'm trying to do at all."

Anderson insists that he must believe in an artist before taking on the project. "I don't want to make records just to make records. I want the artists to come away really loving the record we make, thinking it's the best thing they've ever done. That's what's important to me."

While some producers rely on studio tricks, Anderson tries to keep the music as straightforward and pure as possible. "I'm trying

to make honest records. If you can't write or have some quality to your voice, I shouldn't be producing you, because I believe in exposing the singer and the song."

Maintaining that simplicity is the key to his success with Yoakam, Anderson quickly downplays what many people consider his strong "archivist" approach to country music. "I understand the lineage of where it came from, how it started growing up and was involved with rural blues. It was through people like Clarence Ashley, Doc Watson, and Jimmie Rod-

gers that I became aware of what went into creating country music." Anderson admits he has the ability to draw on the traditions of country music but adds, "That doesn't mean I'm a slave to it."

Anderson is expanding his own boundaries with the production of a new album by country-folk-blues singer Michelle Shocked. The album is finished and will be released later this summer on Mercury. Shocked soon might be following Yoakam's gilded path to music success as charted by Anderson.