

The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2004

NEW YORK UP CLOSE

CITYPEOPLE

A Honky-Tonk Man Whose Turf Is the Hip-Hop City

His prized possession is a 1947 Gibson acoustic guitar, autographed by his heroes, the country star Merle Haggard and the bluegrass legend Doc Watson. He is rarely spotted without his weather-beaten cowboy hat and rugged boots. He has been known to praise whiskey and tall glasses of beer.

Make no mistake: Jack Grace is an old-fashioned country musician.

In a city with limitless options for fans of live hip-hop, rock, jazz and classical music, traditional country is often an afterthought. But Mr. Grace, 35, is that rarest of creatures: a country singer who makes a living performing almost exclusively in New York.

Playing an average of four shows a week at clubs like the Rodeo Bar at 27th Street and Third Avenue, the Lakeside Lounge in the East Village and Hank's Saloon in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, the front man for the five-piece Jack Grace Band is a New York native who gets his musical influences from the old-timey sounds of what used to be called hillbilly music.

"The country thing really happened organically and naturally," said Mr. Grace, who was born John Pancaldo in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and grew up in Armonk in Westchester County. He and his wife, Daria Grace — she is also a country singer, with a band called the King's County Queens — live in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Mr. Grace calls himself "The Martini Cowboy," a nickname, he said, that gets at the dichotomy of city boy/country music.

"When you get older," he said, "you can look silly playing rock. Country you can play till you're 90, till you drop dead."

Mr. Grace's love of country dates to his discovery, as a teenager, of Neil Young's twangy early 1970's albums like "Harvest." Later, he fell in love with Willie Nelson's seminal "Red Headed Stranger." After studying at New York University and later, Burlington College in Vermont, Mr. Grace performed with bands in New York, but spent much of his 20's performing in Boulder, Colo., and San Francisco. Still, he yearned to return to New York.

"What I found I missed was that special energy of New York

City," said Mr. Grace, a country-friendly guy with thick forearms and a long tuft of hair on the end of his chin. "When an audience is with you, it's just like a Yankees game, the support you get."

Mr. Grace has just released an album, "I Like It Wrong," which is available at jackgrace.com. During a recent midnight performance at the Ear Inn in SoHo — he plays there the second Monday of each month — Mr. Grace and his band blasted through rollicking versions of his own material and offered covers of Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash songs. Brown hat pushed back on his hand, Mr. Grace sipped Maker's Mark bourbon between songs and sold copies of his album between sets.

He loves playing in the city, Mr. Grace said, because when his band is clicking and the crowd is responsive, there's no place like New York for a musician, country or otherwise. On any given night, he said, "magic can happen."

KEVIN CANFIELD



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Jack Grace is from the West, of Brooklyn.