

COUNTRY'S OUTSPOKEN ADVOCATE

BY SHEROD ROBERTSON

As Robert K. Oermann embraces the most challenging part of his career, the industry veteran talks to *MusicRow* about his early days, a blessed life, and his never-ending passion for the music.

Robert K. Oermann is one of Nashville's leading multimedia figures -- a journalist, TV personality, radio broadcaster, graphic artist, lecturer, photographer, archivist and author. He is known by many and liked by all. His grasp of our music industry's roots rivals Wikipedia, and his authentic passion for music is incomparable.

Dubbed "the dean of Nashville's music writers," and widely read as a weekly columnist for *MusicRow.com*, Oermann's byline has appeared in more than 100 publications. He has authored eight books and received many awards including the 2000 President's Award from the Recording Academy.

Since arriving in Music City 30 years ago, Oermann has interviewed and written about the biggest artists and executives in country music. Recently, *MusicRow*

turned the tables on Oermann for a rare and exclusive interview, where he confessed, "This is so odd for me. I'm never in this position. I'm a much better interviewer than an interviewee."

With three siblings and 23 first cousins, Robert Oermann's story began in rural Pennsylvania where he was known as Bobby Karl...

MR: Let's go back to the very beginning. How did your interest and exposure to music begin?

Oermann: One of the questions I always ask an artist is "What's the first record you ever bought?" and for me, there is no first record. My grandmother had a record shop and there were records all around, which I loved. When I got to be about ten or so, she started making me clerk in the record shop. It was actually a music shop

located in DuBois, Pennsylvania, which also sold instruments, band uniforms and sheet music. It was the only music store for miles and miles around in what's called Pennsylvucky, the mountainous part in the middle of the state between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. My grandmother also had a jukebox chain and my mother, with her six brothers, went around to all these honkytonks, dives, bars, clubs and truck stops and serviced the jukeboxes. Depending on what bar you were in, you were either stocking hillbilly records or polka records or pop records or R&B records. She gave me the used records off the jukeboxes and I still have them all. I never throw anything away. As most people know about me, I'm a tremendous pack rat. So there's no first record. That's where it started.



Robert K. Oermann,
Roy Acuff and
Minnie Pearl.
Photo: Beth Gwinn

MR: Working in a family music store, does that also mean you came from a musical family?

Oermann: Yes. My mother and father both played the piano. My mother sang beautifully to the point where she had the alto part in the Messiah, “O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion” in Pittsburgh. She taught me to sing and I sang in the choir from the time I was 12. I was originally an alto and then my voice didn’t drop very much. It sort of went from alto to tenor. I took piano and trumpet lessons, and although neither stuck, music and art were my two main interests as a kid. I recently ran across a survey that they gave us when we were freshmen in high school. It asked what top three areas you would choose for a profession. I had written teaching, because my dad was a teacher; art, which is what I wanted to do most of all; and music.

So it was always my intent from the very beginning.

MR: After high school graduation, what was the next step in your journey?

Oermann: My degree is in Fine Arts from the University of Pittsburgh. I went to school on a scholarship because my dad taught there. I wanted to head a print making shop that I started when I was in college. I did music posters for bands. After college, I decided I was going to paint, so I painted for 10 years. I also had a one-man show and a group show. I realized that if my wife and I were to live on what I was making as an artist, we were going to starve. I asked myself, “What do you know the best, besides fine art?” and that was music. I went back to school and got a degree from Syracuse in Informational Studies, which was sort of an archive library program that

allowed you to take courses in whatever you were interested in as long as half of them were in archiving and preservation. I took courses in Information Study, video technology, filmmaking, animation, and recording technology, not really knowing in the back of my mind that I wanted to work in a popular culture archive.

MR: At this point, you had not moved to Nashville yet. How did you make the leap down South?

Oermann: My wife, Mary [Bufwack], and I came to town to research writing a book on the women in country music. Naturally we went to the Country Music Hall of Fame library, and they happened to be looking to hire someone who had a library degree. I told them, “That would be me!” This was in 1978 and it was a wonderful time to come to Nashville. I grew up an R&B fan,

but then in college I started reading about the history of rock and roll. Hank Williams was an influence to all these people. I had records by these people. I went home and played them and I just got it. I totally got country music and I became this wildly zealous convert trying to convince everybody in the world that Dolly Parton was a genius and Kris Kristofferson, Tom T. Hall and all these people who were happening at the time, were just brilliant. That's what drew me to Nashville. I had become a huge country fan.

MR: How did that work experience lead you to writing?

Oermann: People were writing articles, books or screenplays at the library. I read what they wrote and thought, "I could do that." Within four years, I was in *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*. Then in 1981, David Ross started *MusicRow Magazine*. Initially, Al Cooley was the record reviewer. He worked for Combine Music and realized this was a terrible conflict of interest, reviewing records and being a song plugger. He recommended me to David. Around the same time, I also took the music reporter job at the *Tennessean*. I knew that nobody had ever exploited that job the way it should be because it's a key seat to sit in. Within months I was in *USA Today*, which was a brand new start up. I went from never having been in a newspaper office to being in a national newspaper. I got famous for being blunt and outspoken which nobody had been up to that point. Other people reviewed country records, but a bad review would say, "should please his many fans," which meant it was a dog! I would say whatever I thought and try to be as funny as I could. It helped *MusicRow* become prominent and it helped me become notorious.

MR: Your music reviews can be harsh sometimes, but you remain one of the most liked and respected veterans in our industry. How did you accomplish that?

Oermann: I think people got used to me. I remember at one point, I reviewed the symphony and called out the brass section. I was very detailed about what I thought of their performance. Somebody at the symphony said something like, "How dare he? He's a country music reviewer." Someone who knew me told them, "Don't go there. He knows what he's talking

about." Because I had grown up with the Pittsburgh Symphony and had seen every major opera, I was extremely well educated. I come from a place of being very passionate about the music with a deep affection for and knowledge of its history. As I worked at the *Tennessean*, I learned how the business worked. I learned what a publishing company does, the clauses in a record contract and how a booking agency works. I was respected by the business community because I took the time to learn how they worked. I was respected by the artistic community because I was so passionate about the music. If I liked you, I really liked you. Because I was coming from a place of such deep knowledge, I think people grudgingly accepted me. And because I loved the music so much, I think that, more than anything is why people... well to answer your question, I don't know. I don't know why people like me.

MR: You have an impressive private collection of music. Tell me about your collection and your most treasured item.

Oermann: It's huge and it covers all genres of music and media. I have sheet music, signed books, records, photographs and videos. Name the media. I collect it. I also collect all kinds of memorabilia, show posters, Johnny Cash guitar picks, whatever. I have lots of favorite things. Some of them I'm proud to say I bought when they were new, like the Supremes' very first album that didn't have any hits on it. Some of

get a record, I would study it learning those people in parentheses that wrote the song and produced the record. I tried to find out everything I could about it. So when I would meet somebody in Nashville, I knew who they were. "Oh you're John D. Loudermilk. I love 'Tobacco Road'" or "You're Billy Sherrill. I love the production you did on 'Golden Ring' with George and Tammy." I think that helped me get to know people a little better because I wasn't coming at them with, "Who are you?" I knew who they were.

MR: Who are your favorite artists?

Oermann: My favorite kind of music is old time music. If left to my own devices, I will go back and play the Carter Family and Jimmy Rodgers—music from before there was an industry, when it was literally people playing on their front porches. There was no production, just a real innocence and beauty about those people that still appeals to me. I still like listening to old time radio, barn dance performers and stuff like that. It speaks to me because of its innocence and purity. I have, of course, lots and lots of favorites that are contemporary, too. I'm a fan of Eric Church and Little Big Town, but I'm always trying to educate myself on what came before. That's what I'm always doing, pushing backwards and going forward.

MR: What are your thoughts about today's music?

"I would say whatever I thought and try to be as funny as I could. It helped *MusicRow* become prominent and it helped me become notorious."

them I traded and swapped for smartly, like my Beatles Butcher Block cover, which I swapped with some poor unsuspecting kid for the Kings Greatest Hits record (which is readily available). There are tons of really early 45's that I played to death. My earliest favorites were the Everly Brothers. They are worn practically gray and I've learned every note of every record. When I would

Oermann: I think people say, "You're not as harsh as you used to be." That's because the records are better. When I first started reviewing records, at least half of the stack would be just unlistenable garbage. That's no longer the case. I think the music today is just wonderful. Most people's taste gets stuck when they were in high school or college and they don't move beyond

that. Because I was at the newspaper and was reviewing everything that came along, whether it was punk, new wave or cowpunk, I was always growing with the music.

MR: Lately we've lost some icons in our industry, such as Frances Preston and Kitty Wells. As an industry, how are we doing in preserving these legacies?

Oermann: I think one of the most fortunate things I did was come to town when I did. Bill Monroe was alive. Roy Acuff was alive. Minnie Pearl was alive. All of these greats that are now gone. When I first started going out and doing feature articles, I made a point to find the veterans first because I knew they wouldn't be around forever. That was important to me. As I've said before, when death occurs, it is like a treasured library burning to the ground. These people had irreplaceable memories and experiences that we all need to know about. I think country music and Nashville in general does a somewhat better job of honoring those people than rock. One thing about country is that the older fans embrace the new artists and love the old ones too. The younger ones tend not to do that. They don't necessarily respect Loretta Lynn and I think that's something that is changing under our feet. The institutional memory is fading.

MR: How do these legacies affect the next generation?

Oermann: There are kids right now that haven't bothered to learn who Tony Brown is or someone like that, who produced so many great records. We have two valuable universities in Middle Tennessee that teaches them, MTSU and Belmont. The downside of that is it didn't exist when I came to town. When I came to town both the artist and the people in the industry were largely self-taught. In some cases they were truly gifted geniuses like Hank Cochran who sprang from the soil and Dolly Parton, who didn't go to school to

learn what she learned, she crawled out of the cradle knowing it. Although there are still young people like that, there are more that think you can learn this in a textbook

people will look back at the 10's and go, "Wow, they had really cool stuff."

MR: You mentioned your books earlier, which one is your favorite and how did it come about?

Oermann: *Finding Your Voice* is still my favorite book. I wrote it with Mary and I read it again recently when I wrote Kitty Wells' obituary. I think it's well written and historically sound. Mary was teaching women's studies at Colgate University. I was going to

and I don't think you can. Hank Cochran was brilliant and he had no education, not even a 5th grade one. Willie and Merle and that whole generation, including Loretta, were brilliant and yet they had absolutely no book learning. I think the songwriting particularly suffers because of that. Having said that, I also believe 20 years from now

graduate school at Syracuse, which was an hour away. We wanted to combine our interests and we were both country fans. There wasn't anything written about women in country music so we decided to write about it. In the beginning it was very academic, but during the ten years it took to write that book, I got to know the artists

"In some cases they were truly gifted geniuses like Hank Cochran who sprang from the soil and Dolly Parton, who didn't go to school to learn what she learned, she crawled out of the cradle knowing it."



Frances Preston and Robert K. Oermann

and it became something entirely different. I'm still very proud of the fact that it puts the music into a time and place. We used statistics that were going on in America and the music that reflected it. I called the TV special that resulted from the book, "CBS meets PBS," because we interviewed all the legends in it and staged an all-star concert.

MR: Most people aren't familiar with your visual artwork. How did it play a role in your career?

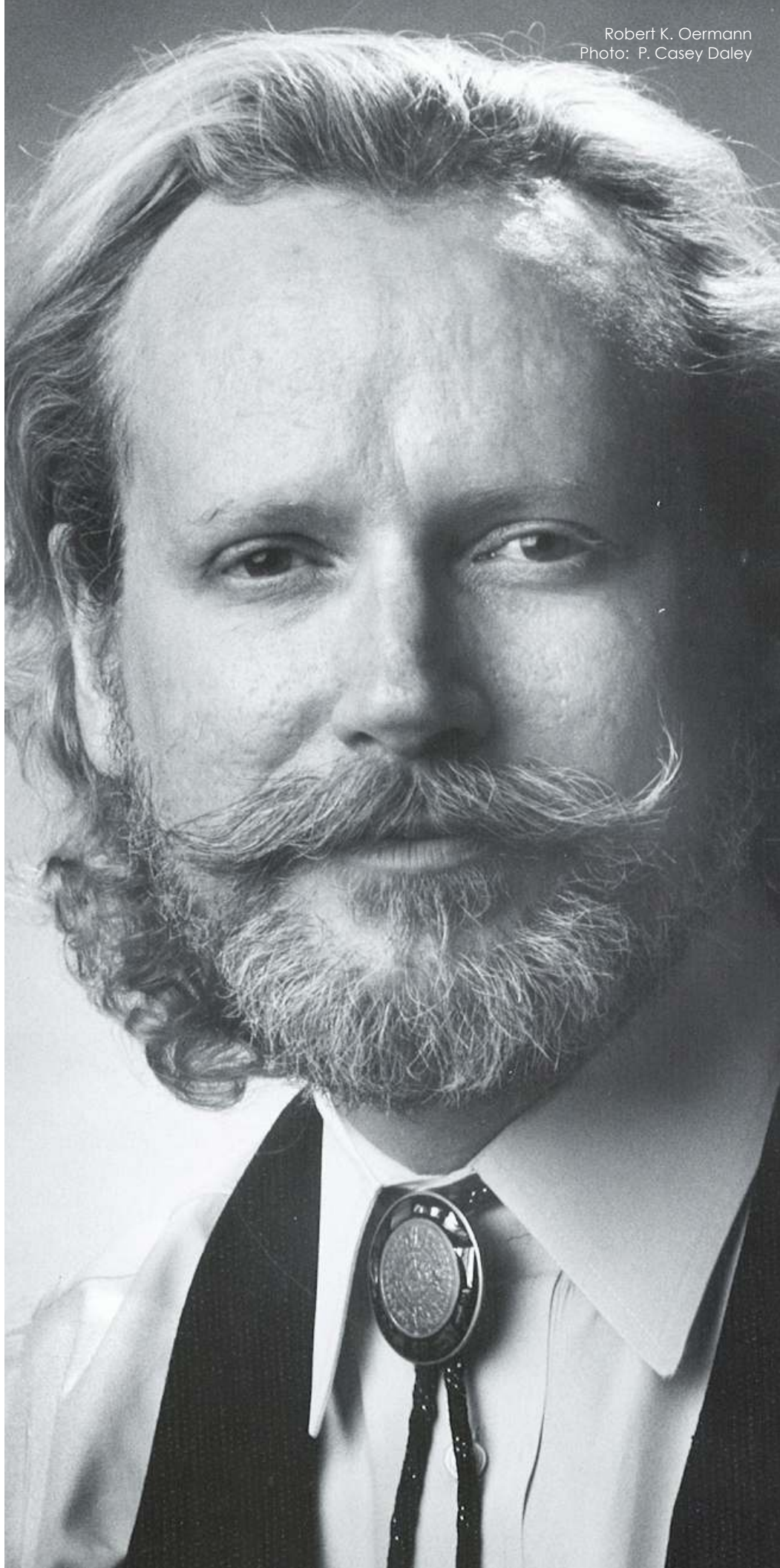
Oermann: My art is figurative, not abstract. Kay Williams, the photographer, calls them Bobby Karl's Monsters. They are fanciful paintings. When I got to town, I began applying my skills to poster work. I did the Harlan Howard Birthday Bash posters for years. I did posters for Riders In The Sky, Kathy Mattea and Steve Earle. I did a lot of posters for artists, showcases and album jackets. I did Rounder's Fan Fair show poster one year and that was cool. I began to use my art as an applied talent, rather than making singular objects for people's collections.

MR: What's the most challenging thing you've gone through professionally?

Oermann: I have had a blessed life. I have been surrounded by love my whole life and many people don't have that. I know how lucky I am. Probably the most challenging part of my life is right now. Books are hurting worse than the record business. There's no bookstores, no record stores, and all those things are forcing me to look at my work in a completely different way. I'm at a crossroads in a way. I have to do another book, one on how Nashville became Music City. I've been approached to do several celebrity biography books, but the only one I've ever done was Brenda Lee. If I had to spend that much time with most celebrities, I would strangle them. But I could spend a whole year with Brenda Lee and never get tired.

MR: Tell me more about Brenda Lee.

Oermann: First, she doesn't know she's Brenda Lee! She has no clue because she was a kid when it all happened. She's as comfy as an old shoe and I love that about her. Because I wasn't star struck and Brenda doesn't act star like, it was perfect. We got along like a house of fire. She didn't want the book to end and I didn't either.



MR: You have such great stories about coming to Nashville. Do you think that era is gone or do we each have our own story?

Oermann: The great part about coming here when I did is it was still a cottage industry. There were no gatekeepers at the record companies. You could walk in and sit down and play records with any executive in town. You could go hang out at Waylon's and that's not the case any more

“I think the most important thing about me is that I'm a hopeless fan.”

for a new person coming to town. I'd like to think that in some ways it's the same. I'd like to think of it as going to college and you have a class that you attend with all those people. You get to know each other and support each other. I'd like to think that there's a class right now. It was a wonderful time to come to Nashville. The old turks were still here. The young turks were starting to happen and the industry was changing. It was becoming more youth oriented and hipper. I have been so lucky to be in the right place at the right time and both of those eras were tremendously exciting. People are still amazed that I'm such a fan, can run into a new artist and get just excited as I did 20 or 30 years ago. I just love that. I love the thrill of discovery.

MR: You know so much about the history of music. What do you think about the future of this business? What does your crystal ball say?

Oermann: If I knew the answer to that, the industry would shower gold at my feet and say “Speak!” I'd be so rich. I don't think anybody knows where this is going. I do think the town is going to be increasingly musically diverse. It already is and I see that continuing. I think the pop end of the town will continue to flex its muscles, and I would love to see a major R&B star break out of this city. Country music occupies such an unusual niche in that the demographic is



Clockwise from left top: Robert K. Oermann and Brenda Lee; Robert K. Oermann and Loretta Lynn; Robert K. Oermann, Dolly Parton and Mary Bufwack; Hazel Smith and Robert K. Oermann.

so wide. You've got to be able to hug a fat lady to work in this industry. I'm optimistic because we have such a wide demographic and there is a humility factor and common folk approach to the business that country will always be healthy. I look at *Billboard* every week and I tally up what percentage of the charts is generated in Nashville and you know what? As long as I've been doing this, which is probably 10-15 years, it's always been the same, it's about a quarter of the product.

MR: We've covered a lot of ground and it's been fun turning the tables on Bobby Karl. Final thought: What's the single most important thing we should know about Robert K. Oermann?

Oermann: I think the most important thing about me is that I'm a hopeless fan. I love

these people and the music they make. I love getting to know them. I love listening to their records. I love seeing them in clubs. I love the songwriters and what they do. I'm still excited. I cry easily and I laugh easily, so music is perfect. I remember one time when Bob Montgomery at Tree Publishing called me and said, “I need you to hear something.” He played Vern Gosdin singing “Chiseled In Stone” which he had just recorded, and I lost it. I just started bawling and he said, “You know what? That's what I really like about you.”