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Review of *Garth Brooks: The Road out of Santa Fe* By Matt O'Meil

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Garth Brooks: The Road out of Santa Fe. By Matt O'Meilia. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. Photographs. xvi + 202 pp. \$19.95.

Garth Brooks has been a musical phenomenon. By various counts, admittedly unreliable and difficult to verify, his record sales between 1989 and 1996 topped sixty million, surpassing those of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson and making him the best selling solo musical act ever. Brooks not only dominated the country music genre; he is often credited with being the main force behind the country music revival of the 1990s, even with being a key factor in the overall growth of the popular music industry early in the decade.

Brooks is an important figure for students of the American West and Great Plains. He is, first of all, part of a burgeoning western and Plains regionalist movement in the 1990s, one that includes art, literature, and movies as well as music. He is a country singer who helped

put the “western” (and the cowboy) back into country and western music. And finally, he grew up and began his career in the plains state of Oklahoma.

While Brooks has yet to demonstrate the staying power and musical innovation of Hank Williams, Elvis, or the Beatles, there is still ample reason for serious scholarly examination of the cultural significance of Garth Brooks and his music. This book makes a small start in that direction. The title may confuse those not among the cognoscenti: *Garth Brooks* is not a conventional biography. Santa Fe was the name of Brooks’s first band, formed in the college town of Stillwater, Oklahoma. For about a year Matt O’Meilia was its drummer. The book is basically a memoir of that experience, tightly restricted to the period between the band’s beginning in 1986 and its breakup in 1987, shortly after Brooks decided to make the move to Nashville and future stardom. While there are insights into Brooks’s personality—an odd blend of down-home country boy and driving ambition—we learn as much about O’Meilia here as about Brooks, who could not or would not be interviewed or provide information for the volume.

O’Meilia writes well—he was going to college as a would-be high school English teacher during his stint with the band—and his perspective on Brooks is distanced and nicely balanced, resulting in neither a fan club hagiography nor a tell-all pot boiler spilling over with dark secrets and scandal. Until a full-scale biography or more scholarly analysis comes along, O’Meilia’s book will be welcome to millions of Garth Brooks fans, and even to more serious students of contemporary things western, as a glimpse into the early career of one of America’s leading popular culture icons.

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