

Rebelle Road: Connecting the Vibrant Present & Past of California Country

By **Nikki O'Neill** - May 26, 2019

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These are the words of Adrienne Isom, KP Hawthorn, and Karen Rappaport McHugh who make up Rebelle Road, a powerhouse entity dedicated to championing and showcasing California country and Americana artists, especially women. They're combining their longtime experiences in music marketing, festival production, visual presentation, and life as touring artists and record label owners. Through artist showcases, boutique festivals, industry panels, and an upcoming record label, podcast, and documentary, they're making their presence known at AMERICANAFEST®, SXSW, and the music scene in their hometown of Los Angeles.

California is one of the epicenters of country music, and casual fans might know of the '50s Bakersfield sound and the '70s country-rock artists coming out of Laurel Canyon. But the twang of the Golden State has a rich and fascinating history that goes further back. Among its pioneers, you'll find female artists like

Rose Maddox, a charismatic singer-songwriter/fiddle player who was a leading figure of the West Coast scene in the '40s. Also, Hollywood created the singing cowboy and the outfits through its movies.

As we meet up with Rebelle Road in L.A., their passion for Cali country's colorful, eclectic, and rebellious present and past is unmistakable.

Rappaport McHugh: There are so many aspects of country music here. It goes way back from the Dust Bowl roots of Oklahoma and all those Okies who ended up in California, like Gene Autry and Woody Guthrie.

Hawthorn: This is the biggest agricultural state in the nation. So that bred a whole bunch of different people, who all basically are country folk. They worked here picking fruit, had babies, and played music together as families.

Rappaport McHugh: You've got this connection—Route 66—going across. While a lot of musicians did end up in Texas, many also came out here. They formed the Western sound. This music used to be called "country and western," but that sort of got eradicated.

Fast-forward to 2018. Now you have artists like Calico the Band, Nocona, Molly Hanmer, Alice Wallace, and many others spread out across a large state in dire need of connected artist communities and a defined path for touring. One major part of Rebelle Road's mission is to fill this need.

Isom: We've played in bands forever. We're in this thing that we're building. So, we know what's really wrong with it, and we know what we want. There's no defined easy touring way to come through California. We're trying to connect

and build a community and make a trail from here to Canada so that people can tour the West Coast.

Rappaport McHugh: Nashville and Texas have very strong artist communities, but from San Diego and all the way up to Northern California, a lot of artists don't even know each other. So, we feel a need to foster the California country and Americana community and to be a part of it, because it used to be so rich.

They have not been wasting time in moving towards this goal. In March of 2017, Rebelle Road hosted an artist showcase at SXSW, and in August, they threw their first festival in L.A.—the “Downtown Hoedown” with 12 music acts.

Rappaport McHugh: At SXSW, we arranged that each one who came in would get a gift bag. We had platters of food out. Every artist came up to us and said, “I've never felt so welcomed, well treated, and respected.”

Isom: If you're used to getting out there and playing and hustling, you know how rough it is, and you expect nothing. If somebody just treats you nice, it means everything.

The way your backgrounds complement each other is striking.

Isom: We're all the heads of our own departments. KP is a musician, sound engineer, and producer. Karen, she's a marketing pro and a writer. The words don't get better. And the art department—don't touch it, it's mine.

Rappaport McHugh: Because we work together so well, we don't need to outsource a lot of things that an individual artist does. When you're alone, you

have to hire a PR person, a marketing person, a branding person, a social media person, an image person... and so you're spending lots of time on that, and the crafting of the art itself is challenging enough.

How did you all meet and start Rebelle Road?

Isom: Karen hired our band for Stagecoach Festival four years ago. Later on, I performed at an incredible outdoor stage and thought, "I need to throw a festival out here." KP and I got talking about it. As artists in bands, we want to play, but you can't get into festivals unless you know someone. Many artists who get in are repped by CAA and other big agencies. Nobody is getting into anything fairly ever.

So, in March of 2017, we scheduled a call with Karen since she has festival production experience. She wanted to partner with us, and a few weeks later, we had a meeting. There were 10 or 15 people in the room—whoever was into this idea. We ate, drank, and wrote a big chalkboard of ideas. The next day, only three of us kept going, every single day since then.

Rebelle Road is not strictly for women. You have male artists at your events.

Isom: I don't want an all-women festival. I want things to be fair.

Rappaport McHugh: We want to work with people who want more of a level playing field. We don't want to say, "We're exclusively about women," and turn the tables the other way. We try to be gender-balanced in all the things that we do.

In September, Rebelle Road heads to AMERICANAFEST in Nashville to host a “California Country Social.” This showcase has been Hawthorn’s project for the last three years.

Hawthorn: I started a record label with my band partner because we could get the publicist and distribution if we had the label in place. We teamed up with Danny McCloskey at The Alternate Root (online magazine) since we were performing at AMERICANAFEST. But we also wanted to do our own event, because we were the only band from California that got a showcase that year. So, we did a California Country Social and had a bunch of people perform on our show who didn’t get a showcase on AMERICANAFEST.

Then we did it another year and built it bigger. The label is gone, but now with Rebelle Road, we’re getting help from The Alternate Root, Spaceland Presents, and The Grand Ole Echo (Americana showcase in L.A.) to promote it. We’ll have a segment with a house band playing classic California country songs, where people will get up and do one or two songs each, including artists from Nashville.

Rebelle Road is also releasing their first artist on their new record label, Rebelle Road Records, in 2019, and a documentary is in the works, but the trio can’t say more about these ventures yet. However, a podcast is coming soon...

Tell us about your upcoming podcast, “Stories from the Highway.”

Rappaport McHugh: We have a deal with a production company. KP will be the host, and she’s already been doing lots of interviews for it. It’s thematic to Rebelle Road, and the idea is to showcase artists and give them an opportunity



to talk about life on the road.

Karen and Adrienne, is Rebelle Road a tough venture to combine with being active artists?

Hawthorn: What's really neat about it is that it's a giving thing. We film these small parlor events where artists play in a living room, and we have a YouTube channel where we link all the videos. It's fun to care about somebody else, how good they sound and look. And then you make friends with them... they reach out when they're on tour or coming back into town. They're all becoming a family to us.